

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia Incorporated

Annual Report FOR 180 B.E.



20 MARCH 2023 - 19 MARCH 2024



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its “plans, ... [its] hopes, and ...
[its] cares” will assist the delegates to
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them the followers of Bahá’u’lláh in this
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the year ahead.*

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Movement of Clusters	3
Learning from the Most Advanced Clusters	9
Contributing to Social Transformation	17
Educational Endeavours and the Training Institute	23
Raising Capacity for Administration at all Levels	30
Concluding Remarks	46
Appendix A	
Functioning of the National Spiritual Assembly	48
Appendix B	
Overall Composition & Growth of the Australian Bahá'í Community	51
Appendix C	
Core Activities Since the Start of the Nine Year Plan	53

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Introduction

The National Spiritual Assembly is pleased to present its annual report for 180 B.E., the second year of the current Nine Year Plan. The past year was illuminated by the Thirteenth International Bahá'í Convention held in the Holy Land at Ridván, where members of the National Assembly that was elected in 179 B.E. had the privilege of participating in the election of the Universal House of Justice. The spirit released by that sacred occasion, an ingathering of representatives of 176 pillars of the House of Justice, permeated last year's National Convention and the year that followed.

Among the gifts of the House of Justice in the past year was its 28 November 2023 letter to the Bahá'ís of the world, *"Reflections on the First Century of the Formative Age"*, a landmark document which allows us to situate ourselves in the path of learning of the Bahá'í community worldwide and to see the prospect that lies before us. This annual report seeks to draw on that message and to position our country within it. It also conveys the priorities and objects of learning the National Assembly has identified for its work, as well as outlining key achievements and advances of the past year. The content of the report is also illustrated by a series of vignettes illustrating experience being gained at the frontiers of learning in different parts of the country, noting that while "not every community exhibits the characteristics of the most advanced... Nevertheless, the appearance of new capacities in any one place signals an evident advance and serves as an augury that others will surely follow in that path."



Colonnade of the Seat of the
Universal House of Justice

In reviewing the developments of the past year in our vast country, there is much cause for optimism. The Universal House of Justice itself observed, in its 7 July 2023 response to the message conveyed to it by last year's National Convention:

"It brings us great joy to call to mind the extraordinary feats that your community continues to achieve and the abundant receptivity that all strata of society in your country evince. The possibilities for further progress before your community are immense. As the friends across your vast country continue to press forward in a diversity of efforts as part of one broad collective movement, may they see their contributions to the advancement of their society grow evermore. In all their further exploits, our fervent prayers in the Holy Shrines are with them".

Highlights of the past year have been the flourishing of individuals creatively applying the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh through words and deeds in partnership with other well-wishers of humanity in neighbourhoods, professional and social networks and especially in more than 2000 groups of families in urban and regional centres across our vast country. We have also observed the continuing maturation of Regional Bahá'í Councils and Local Spiritual Assemblies, developments outlined later in this report. But nothing brings greater joy or more promise for the future than witnessing the Australian Bahá'í community advancing as a learning community, marked by increasingly conscious and systematic pursuit of learning processes and strengthened systems for sharing insights gained across the country. This culture of learning,

"among the finest fruits of the first century of the Formative Age", must "increasingly inform the work of every institution, community, and individual in the years ahead".

The National Assembly wishes to particularly acknowledge the Counsellors and the leading role they have played, supported by their Auxiliary Board members, in fostering and adding rigour to our learning culture. The Counsellors are the National Assembly's closest collaborators; we treasure the strength of our partnership and acknowledge with gratitude the loving and sacrificial service they offer to this nation.

The Bahá'í world has now reached the mid-point of the first phase of the Nine Year Plan, a four-year period that will end at Ridván 2026, to be followed by its second phase extending from 2026 to 2031. While we pause to celebrate the progress made, we remain mindful of the considerable work yet to be done and of the prevailing conditions in our country, where the forces that would polarise us, distract our focus and sap our energy are gaining in strength.

The National Assembly hopes this presentation of its "plans, ...[its] hopes, and ... [its] cares" will assist the delegates to the National Convention, and beyond them the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in this country, to understand the condition and progress of our community in the past year and give stimulus and direction to plans for the year ahead.

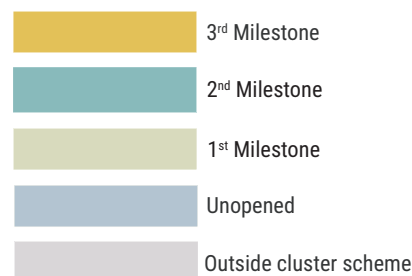
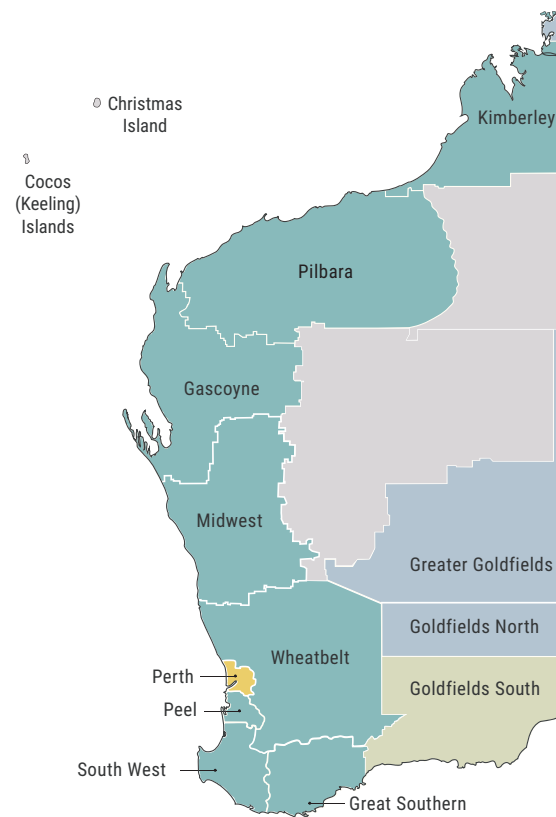
Movement of Clusters

In summarising the tasks immediately before the Bahá'í world, the 28 November message identifies firstly *“the multiplication and intensification of programmes of growth in clusters worldwide”*. The National Assembly envisages that by the end of the Nine Year Plan, in all but the most sparsely populated parts of our country, large numbers – relative to the population – will be working together and contributing to the life of a vibrant community. We have indicated to the Universal House of Justice that 63 of our 68 clusters can reach the third milestone of growth by the end of the Nine Year Plan. At the international level, we have also committed to the international goal set for our country by the House of Justice to mobilise 26 pioneers to 12 designated countries and regions currently lacking a third milestone cluster, as early as possible in the first phase of the Plan.

As at Naw-Rúz 2024, 61 of the 68 clusters in Australia have initiated a program of growth, thereby reaching the first milestone of development. Of these, 55 have passed the second milestone of an intensive program of growth, 21 of which have also traversed the third milestone by establishing a pattern of activity that embraces large numbers.

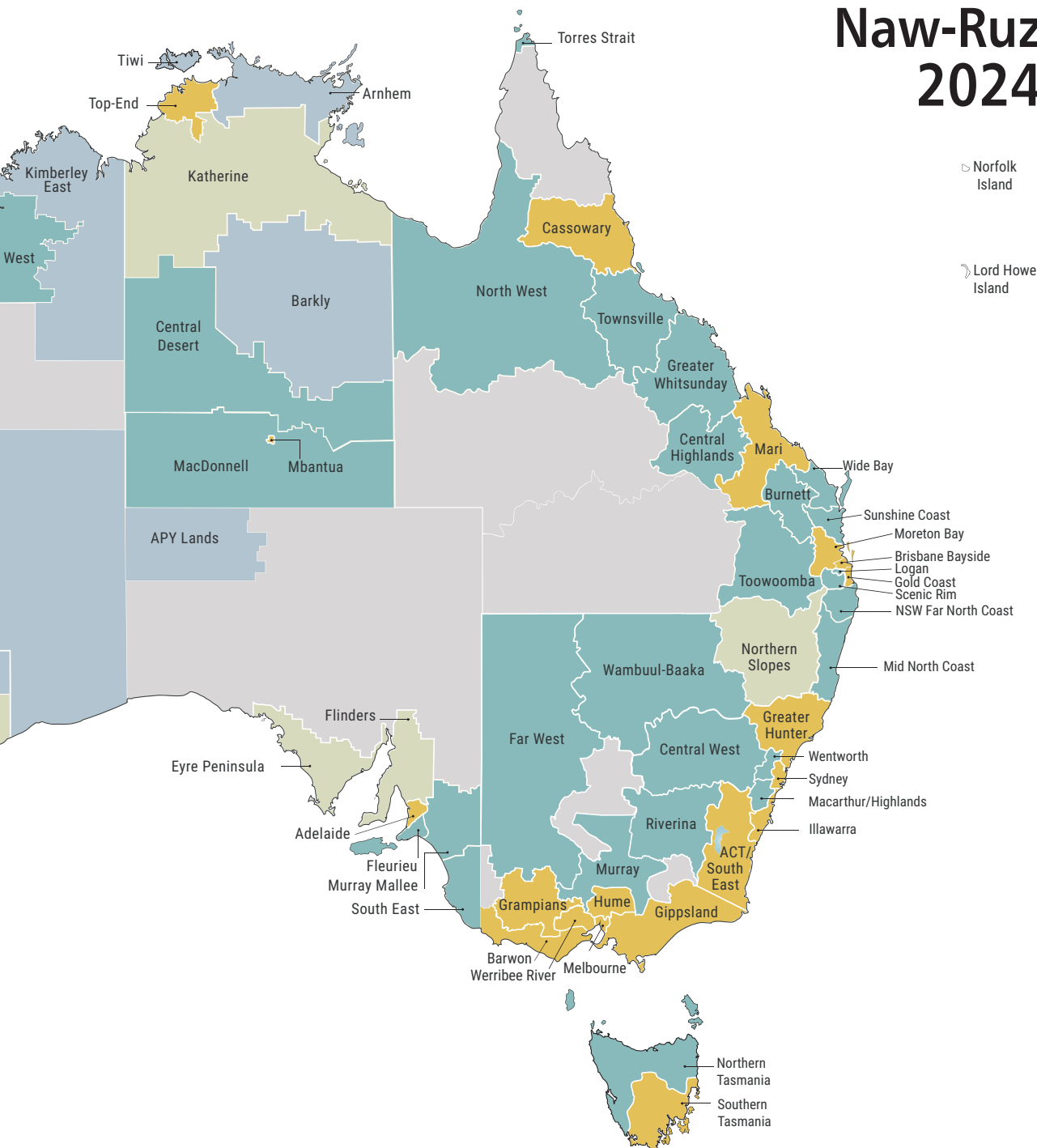
The ambitious goal set at the outset of the Plan, following an intensive process of consultation with Regional Bahá'í Councils and the institution of the Counsellors, was for 62 clusters to have moved from the first to the second milestone, by the end of the first phase of the Plan, two years from now, 45 of which would also have reached the third milestone. Clearly this will require the dedicated efforts to advance at a significantly increased pace. Reservoir clusters are required to provide

A U S T R A L I A MOVEMENT OF CLUSTERS



systematic support to their neighbours, drawing upon strategies learned during previous Plans, such as the deployment of pioneers, visiting teams and resource persons as well as opportunities for the protagonists to visit and learn directly from clusters further down the path of development. Regional Bahá'í Councils have been reviewing the status of clusters in their regions and putting the necessary resources and strategies in place, in close collaboration with members of the

Naw-Ruz 2024



Auxiliary Board. The annual reports of the Councils provide a more detailed overview of their work and the processes being advanced in each region.

At the outset of the Nine Year Plan, as reflected in the cluster map, certain geographic areas that are sparsely populated due to the natural terrain were removed from the clustering scheme. The small number of friends living in these remote areas remain valued

members of the community who can apply elements of the Plan as applicable to their circumstances. In the past year, the National Assembly has provided the initiative previously known as the Outback Project with renewed membership and a revised mandate to connect and support these friends, ensuring they receive a steady flow of love, guidance and information.

Learning about Teaching

The National Assembly envisions that over the course of the Nine Year Plan the Australian Bahá'í community will grow significantly, as those inspired by the vision of Bahá'u'lláh come to identify themselves with the community and take up the privileges and responsibilities of being an enrolled Bahá'í. Every believer has a natural longing to share the gift of the Faith with others, and can contribute to learning about teaching in different settings. As outlined in the 30 December 2021 message, the friends should “reflect periodically on effective ways of teaching the Faith in their surroundings ... Different settings and circumstances lend themselves to different approaches, and the friends should be occupied in an ongoing process of learning about what is most effective in the place where they are.”

Early in the year, the National Assembly wrote to all Local Assemblies encouraging them to consult on a meaningful approach to learning about teaching and specifically about enrolments in their particular reality, noting the guidance in the Ridván 2023 message that:

“Knowing well that the doors of the Faith always stand wide open, the believers are learning how to give encouragement to those who are poised to enter. To walk with such souls, and to help them cross the threshold, is a privilege and a special joy; in each cultural context, there is much to be learned about the dynamics of this resonant moment of recognition and belonging”.

At the same time, after following a learning process in a small number of settings, we approved the use of alternative mechanisms for registration such as an online form or vouching, in cases where the requirement to sign a declaration card may pose a barrier.

In November 2023, webinars were held for Local Assemblies to review the guidance and gain and share learning. While some limited insights have been obtained, however, the number of new believers registered on Encompass has in fact fallen significantly in the past year to 68. This calls for significant reflection and the National Assembly places high priority on further supporting the learning process around teaching.

The challenge before us is not a lack of receptivity, nor a lack of engagement and participation by seekers. As a community we have learned about many aspects of teaching and have become adept at inviting others into the community-building process and our community life. Thousands of our fellow Australians attended the world conferences at the outset of this Plan; one quarter of study circle participants are not registered Bahá'ís, as are one third of those participating in devotional gatherings, and two thirds of those participating in educational programs for junior youth and children. If just 10% of these friends could be encouraged to take the next step it would be a significant advance for our country. Our challenge is to learn together about what helps embolden people to take this step and how to remove any obstacles.

One segment of the community that has demonstrated significant receptivity in recent years has been Iranians of Muslim background. Last year's National Convention recommended to the National Assembly that the processing of declarations from individuals of Iranian background, with permanent residency, be brought to within a reasonable timeframe. Following a review of the relevant guidance and reflection on experience, the National Assembly has now revised its policies such that only those declarants lacking permanent residency require an extended accompaniment process, which has been more clearly defined for Local Assemblies. It is hoped that this change will remove any unnecessary delays for those from the Cradle of the Faith who have recognised Bahá'u'lláh to register and become fully engaged in all aspects of community life.



Vignette **Learning about Teaching** *Mosman Park, Perth*

Mosman Park is a small but outward looking community of less than 50 registered believers. The youth movement in Mosman Park began in June 2019 with the formation of a team of five youth and two accompanying adults who committed to a systematic cyclical process of expansion and consolidation.

Every cycle an intensive campaign is held to outreach and converse with youth, foster genuine friendships and swiftly engage them in community building activities such as camps, junior youth groups and the courses of the training institute. In the past year, 20 souls entered the training institute over four cycles and four youth declared their faith in Bahá'u'lláh. These included a number of participants in the junior youth program who were invited to Book 1 after the vision of opportunities beyond the program was built with families through home visits and end of camp family nights. The decision to “cross the threshold” was a natural next step.

Key capacities that have been built over time include capacity to engage in conversations, to retain an outward-looking orientation, and to engage in a systematic learning process. Complexity has built over time with different teams emerging in response to the natural growth of the community's activities: an animator team, teacher team, tutor team, devotional team and “Sisterhood” team which engages in discourse or social action projects. There is constant communication and collaboration between the teams who share a common vision of “engaging ever growing numbers in systematic conversations on the contribution they can make to the improvement of their society and on providing for the needs of others- particularly younger generations”.



INTERNATIONAL PIONEERING GOALS

We are blessed to be a country identified by the Universal House of Justice as possessing the strength and experience to generate a flow of pioneers to communities at an earlier stage of development. By Naw-Rúz, 22 consecrated souls had arisen and been deployed, including seven children, to eight of our 12 goal countries. An additional 13 souls are currently preparing to be deployed to these and two other goal countries. Some have already made short-term visits but are yet to gain long-term visas. We are confident that all our goals will be filled in the coming year, other than one country which is currently not accepting pioneers due to internal conditions. Additional friends have expressed interest in international pioneering and are being oriented in anticipation of further goals.

This achievement has been supported by the systematic efforts of the international pioneering taskforce, including significant learning, in collaboration with the Regional Bahá'í Councils, about developing a suitable pioneer orientation process. The National Assembly was delighted to receive a letter from the Universal House of Justice dated 26 December 2023 which described these efforts as “a source of joy to the House of Justice” and noted that “With the awareness and experience thus achieved, it is hoped that the deployment of subsequent contingents of pioneers can move forward with greater ease and agility”. Our aspiration for the coming year is to continue to develop a coherent national system for the identification and orientation of international and homefront pioneers.



*The Rostami family are pioneering
in the Mariana Islands*

Vignette **International Pioneering** *in Guam, Mariana Islands*

In the initial days of our service, our family would walk through our focus neighbourhood seeking to understand our new reality. Our eyes were constantly greeted by dumped trash lining each street, a string of abandoned cars, large heavy household appliances deserted on the sides of the bushy road, and the lingering smoke-scented air of burning trash. With every step, an abundance of material neglect filled the neighbourhood.

Twelve months later we realised there was a spiritual reality we had initially missed: the landscape is filled with the limitless potentialities released by the institute process. Now as we walk along these same streets, we are greeted with joyful smiles and open arms. Sweet groups of neighbourhood children jumping up and down rushing to us, with their first question, do we have children's classes today? Youth asking when the next camp will be. Parents asking us to open the door wide, to come in and sit with them on the floor inside their home. The inspiration of observing how a 16 year old youth prepares herself mentally, physically and spiritually to run a children's class with such perfection. The joy of hearing how a group of siblings huddled inside their room together at night to read from their gifted prayer book they received at the completion of Book One.

Each of these souls are glistening jewels, and with each interaction with the educational process, we discover new talents and strengths we didn't know existed. But the greatest transformation is our own. The endless trash and rusted abandoned cars are not only still there, but piling further by the day. But those imperfections initially seen have faded in comparison to the spiritual beauty which surrounds us. This inner sight is now able to appreciate the hidden gems within the neighbourhood, that will continue to be further polished and revealed by the institute process, throughout this Nine Year Plan.

Learning from the Most Advanced Clusters

It is a great strength for our country, and a fruit of the previous series of Plans, that the vast majority of the population already live in third milestone clusters.

The 28 November 2023 message describes the communities that can emerge in such settings:

“Across advanced clusters and within villages and neighbourhoods that are centres of intense activity, a community emerges with a sense of common identity, will, and purpose, providing an environment for nurturing the capacity of individuals and uniting them in a range of complementary and mutually reinforcing activities that welcome all and seek to uplift everyone”.

The National Assembly is delighted to observe the emergence of such communities in advanced clusters in Australia, whether at the level of a neighbourhood or a centre of intense activity. Further experience is also being gained through working in professional or other networks, especially through working in groups of families, and in engaging with receptive populations across a cluster.



The approach of working in groups of families has been a significant breakthrough in recent years, one which extends across all advanced clusters. More than 2000 such groups now exist, a doubling of the number reported last year, albeit many at the earliest stage in the path. There are robust learning processes about groups of families under way in all three regions, and efforts to systematise a national learning process with shared objects of learning across the country. Through systematic process of reflection and documentation of learning, we are now able to trace a path of development for groups of families through four stages, from emerging groups where some initial collaboration exists, to those involving many people consciously planning and working together, raising resources through the training institute and holding regular camps, festivals and community gatherings.

A characteristic of each third milestone cluster is at least one centre of intense activity. There are more than 20 such centres at different stages of development in every state and territory across Australia. A recent frontier is learning about decentralisation of the Feast to the level of a centre of intense activity or neighbourhood, strengthening friendships and creating a nurturing space for universal and vibrant consultations pertaining to local activities close to home. The most advanced centres are learning to support fledgling centres at an earlier stage, especially where there is a natural movement and linkage between populations, whether in an adjacent suburb, or to an outer suburb to which friends naturally gravitate when they are starting or expanding their family. Efforts are now being made to follow and track centres of intense activity more systematically.



Vignette **Working in a Professional Network** *Sydney*

A Bahá'í professional had been working for a not-for-profit organisation in the health sector for over six years but had never seriously contemplated her workplace as a setting to learn about the community-building process. One day at a work function, her colleague, a senior executive in the organisation, shared that he had been exploring spirituality and asked for a book to read. The Bahá'í decided that instead of giving him a book, she would try to invite him to be part of the institute. She explained that there is a course called *"Reflections on the life of the spirit"* which she could facilitate if he found some other participants to form a group. He quickly found two colleagues who were also interested. By the time of the first session in June 2023, three had become six as individuals invited others in their network. Over time the group has grown to ten. Having senior executives participate in the group has greatly assisted other employees to feel that study of the course is appropriate, "normal" and even needed in a corporate context.

The study circle is held in the boardroom, previously the most "corporate" room on the floor. In the first session, reading the first part of the "To the collaborators" proved very helpful to put all participants at ease in knowing they were there to gain skills, knowledge and insights to build their capacity to serve. Invited to share actions the group could take as they walked this path, they suggested using the course to interact and manage their teams better, building the habit of studying the Writings every day, and going for an excursion to the House of Worship.

When the group studied the second unit of Book 1, participants quickly warmed to prayer, even those who had never prayed before. They started to use prayer as a tool in the work toolbox to assist them in the operation of their teams, especially when there is a crisis or difficulty. After finishing the unit and holding a devotional gathering, the group decided to have a 15-20 minute weekly devotional open to anyone at work. This devotional has been sustained, creating a space where everyone is connected and supported and no one is judged. Over time participants have developed the habit to turning to guidance to solve problems at work and in the world. When faced with a question, they may ask the group or look up quotations from the Writings online and share them with other participants. They now also ask a lot about what the Faith has to say on a variety of subjects.

Path of Development of Groups of Families

1. EMERGING: Potential groups of families are identified or begin to emerge naturally according to geographic proximity and/or other relationships between families. A pattern of activity or some initial collaboration between the families exists but there is little or no conscious recognition by those friends that they belong to a group of families.

2. NASCENT: There is conscious recognition by the friends that they belong to a group of families and an initiator is acting to sustain a pattern of regular nucleus meetings during which they study, reflect, consult and plan community building activities with a view to growth.

3. EXPANDING: Families are working together with an outward orientation. Collaborative arrangements strengthen and community-building activities are organised with a view to widen the embrace to many nearby households. An informal network of friends provides encouragement and support to the endeavours underway. Camps, festivals and community gatherings are held. There is regular space for members of the group to study, consult and reflect on action. Some capacity to narrate the journey and the learning as a group are evident.

4. ADVANCING: Strengthening of the training institute is resulting in a flow into and through the sequence of courses as human resources arise from within the expanding group of families. There are glimmerings of a culture of worship and service involving many people.

Social action can be seen. The arts are integrated into activities. Camps, festivals and community gatherings are held more systematically and frequently. Indicators of the formalisation of educational endeavours emerge. Ability to document learning strengthens. Collaborative arrangements are developing among groups of families.

“...families and individual believers working together and making a conscious decision to see themselves as belonging to an expanding nucleus.”

*Message of the
Universal House of Justice
dated 30 December 2021*

Vignette **Working with Indigenous populations** *Thursday Island, Far North Queensland*

When a young couple moved to Thursday Island two and a half years ago, they discovered a lull in activities on this island, where the Faith has been present for 50 years. As a first step they approached one of the friends who had previously served as a children's class teacher and started a new children's class together. The children came from a pocket of 15 homes, consisting of a number of interconnected families. As the class grew to 10-15 children, and through regular festivals, these families became more and more involved, from children through to grandparents.



Bahá'í Children's Classes on Thursday Island

Towards the end of 2023, four of the children graduated grade one and it was decided to form a junior youth group in the pocket. Over the summer period in 2023-24, through many home visits and conversations, and with the support of the Bahá'ís and elders in the community, a second junior youth group was formed on the island. Both groups began to meet weekly with their animators. After learning about the concept of service, one group decided to walk around the neighbourhood to observe what the needs are. Initially they made observations such as the grass here is too long or the playground needs to be repaired. But when they reflected more deeply, they observed that the children in the community were not outside: they were at home watching TV or playing games on their devices. The group's first service project, which occurred two days from their initial consultations, was to invite all the children in the area to come out of their houses to participate in activities that the junior youth

Vignette continued

Working with Indigenous populations

Thursday Island, Far North Queensland

group had organised. They played sports and other games as well as an art activity with chalk drawings. The junior youth reflected after the activity and it was a profoundly moving moment when they realised they had fulfilled their goal.

The friends serving these two pockets are striving to learn what it looks like when the institute process takes root in a community. In addition to the children's class, festivals and the two junior youth groups they have had many profound conversations and home visits and built true friendships in the community. They understood quickly that rather than speak to one person and expect them to come to an activity, there is a need to speak with and receive the support of the whole family. They discovered the deep connections that Bahá'ís and elders have in the community which are a profound source of support and have allowed efforts to move forward. They have had the blessing to see the growing impact of the institute on the island. Mothers are wishing to learn to become teachers for the growing children's class, junior youth are gaining in capacity and confidence, and other activities such as a Book One study circle and regular devotional spaces and home visits are drawing hearts closer. The friends continue to discover many ways to make spiritual connections with those around them.



Vignette

Centres of Intense Activity Supporting Emerging Communities and One Another

*Westmead, Pemulwuy and
Bundara Way, Sydney*

At a recent cluster retreat in Sydney, the Auxiliary Board members, friends serving on the cluster agencies and from various settings consulted on how established centres of intense activity like Mt Druitt and Westmead could be better connected to emerging centres to lend support and improve the dissemination of insights. As a result, the Westmead core team and emerging centres in Pemulwuy and Bundara Way have been collaborating to strengthen the institute process in each of these neighbourhoods.

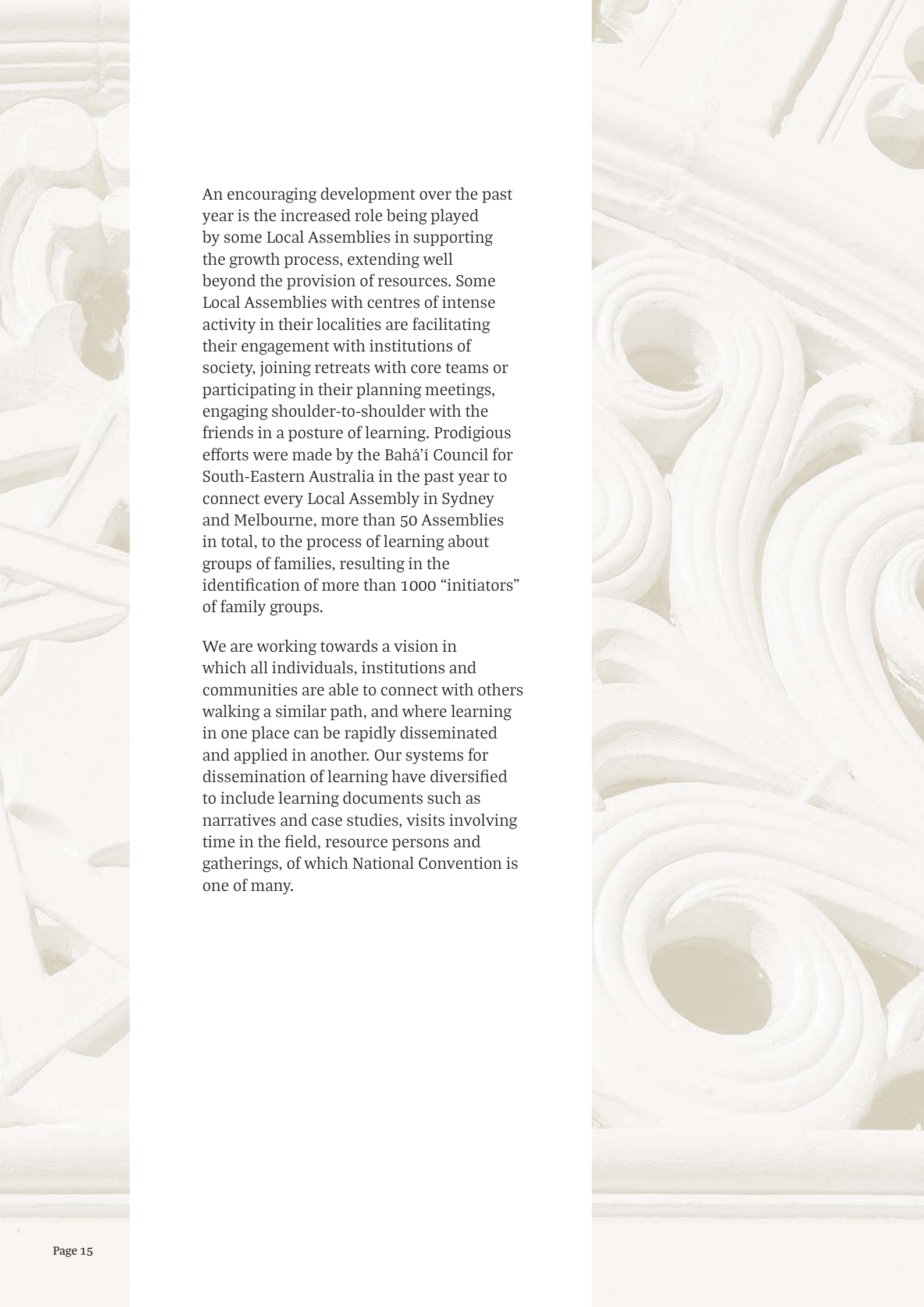


Every week, a group of 12 youth from across the three neighbourhoods meet to reflect, study guidance, and plan for the week ahead. Initially, the study of several letters from the Universal House of Justice shaped their vision of a lifelong path of service and long term commitment to the development of the institute. Based on the study of this guidance, the group has written a vision statement to strengthen unity of thought and guide their efforts.

Currently, the group is learning intensively about strengthening the movement of youth and junior youth in each of the neighbourhoods, which they go about accomplishing by accompanying each other in the field of action. They are making arrangements to support each other in the field to engage more youth in conversations on spiritual themes and invite them to walk a path of service, to start new junior youth groups, expand current ones and accompany the junior youth through the study of the texts. They understand that one's victories and setbacks are the concern of all, so they share experiences and insights to help each other progress.



Community building activities in Bundara Way, Sydney



An encouraging development over the past year is the increased role being played by some Local Assemblies in supporting the growth process, extending well beyond the provision of resources. Some Local Assemblies with centres of intense activity in their localities are facilitating their engagement with institutions of society, joining retreats with core teams or participating in their planning meetings, engaging shoulder-to-shoulder with the friends in a posture of learning. Prodigious efforts were made by the Bahá'í Council for South-Eastern Australia in the past year to connect every Local Assembly in Sydney and Melbourne, more than 50 Assemblies in total, to the process of learning about groups of families, resulting in the identification of more than 1000 “initiators” of family groups.

We are working towards a vision in which all individuals, institutions and communities are able to connect with others walking a similar path, and where learning in one place can be rapidly disseminated and applied in another. Our systems for dissemination of learning have diversified to include learning documents such as narratives and case studies, visits involving time in the field, resource persons and gatherings, of which National Convention is one of many.

Vignette **Collaboration with the Local Assembly** *Elizabeth Neighbourhood, Adelaide*

The Elizabeth neighbourhood (formerly known as Salisbury) emerged around the end of 2017. In the early stages of its formation, the Local Spiritual Assembly of Playford was encouraged to take a hands-off approach while the friends tried to find their feet, as an “emerging pattern of action in a small area can easily be smothered by too much outside attention...”. Accompaniment of the friends at this stage was mostly through the Auxiliary Board members. Now that the neighbourhood has become firmly established, the Local Assembly has been learning about how to support and walk shoulder to shoulder with those living and serving in a neighbourhood within its locality.



Neighbourhood gatherings in Elizabeth, Adelaide

Naturally, a modest amount of assistance has been in the form of logistical support for activities planned in the neighbourhood or to support the pioneers themselves. Aside from this, the Local Assembly has kept an open dialogue through periodic meetings with the core team of the neighbourhood to hear of developments and see where opportunities for collaboration may exist. A number of members serving on the Local Assembly are connected to the Elizabeth neighbourhood, which helps with the flow of information from the neighbourhood to the institution and vice versa. There have also been occasions for members to be in the field with the friends, participate in joint activities, assist with the maintenance of the pioneer homes and consult on areas of joint learning such as the development of Nineteen Day Feasts in the neighbourhood. It is hoped that as the institution learns and consults with the ever-growing team of friends in the neighbourhood, the connection will continue to be strengthened and assist with the advancement of the community-building work.

Contributing to Social Transformation

The 28 November 2023 message expresses the coherence between the different elements of the Nine Year Plan in our endeavour at the grassroots:

“As the friends labour in their clusters, they are inexorably drawn into the life of the society around them, and the learning process that propels efforts for growth and community building is extended to an expanding range of activities. Community life is increasingly characterized by its contribution to material, social, and spiritual progress as the friends cultivate their capability to understand the conditions of society around them, create spaces in which to explore concepts from Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation and from relevant fields of human knowledge, bring insights to bear upon practical problems, and build capacity among the believers and within the wider community”.

While contributing to devotional life and spiritual education will remain at the core of who we are and what we do, the National Assembly envisages that our efforts to transform society in light of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh will diversify and broaden greatly during the Nine Year Plan. Counter to the inertia of the prevailing tendency in our society to look to government alone to solve all problems, individuals and groups are empowered to work together to address the barriers to spiritual and material progress they identify in their communities, at the level of both action and thought.

Vignette

Glimmerings of Transformation

Aitkenvale Neighbourhood, Townsville

A family in Aitkenvale began a weekly devotional about two years ago, with a firm commitment to two things: constancy over an extended period and striving to contribute to enhancing the devotional character of the neighbourhood. Over the past year, six families engaged in core activities have shared the hosting of the weekly devotional space, three of which are from the broader community. These families sustained their efforts through mutual support, overcoming obstacles to participation and hosting together.

The devotional has been an important portal to expand activities to include whole families. Over time it became clear that the weekly devotional and the other spaces for children's classes, junior youth and youth mutually reinforced each other in terms of building understanding and capacity for reverence, strengthening the identity of children, junior youth, youth and families as participants and protagonists in a community building process, and increasing confidence and capacity to read the Word of God.

The glimmerings of transformation in the neighbourhood are evidenced in many small but beautiful ways. Children, junior youth, and youth ask ahead of time about who is going to host the devotional meeting that week. There is a significant shift in the preparation of the house by hosts to create a clean, orderly and beautiful environment. Increasing reverence is manifest through focus during prayers and the way the Word of God is handled. Participants of all ages read and sing prayers, often more than one each. Hosts of various ages, from children to adults, welcome guests, open and close the devotions with increasing confidence and competence. On average one new family is brought into the expanding nucleus each cycle through the devotional space.



Devotional gathering in Aitkenvale, Townsville

SOCIAL ACTION

As a community we are still in the early stages of learning about identifying barriers to progress in our communities and developing responses within the framework for social action, bearing in mind that our contribution will be “distinguished by its focus on building capacity for service ... an approach founded on faith in the ability of a population to become the protagonists of their own development.” The National Assembly noted a rise in the number of short-term social action initiatives since the beginning of the Nine Year Plan. In the first year of the Nine Year Plan, we saw an increase of more than 60% in both short-term and sustained social action endeavours. Short-term initiatives (434 in the year ending Ridván 2023), often initiated by junior youth groups, include tree-planting, clean-up projects and community awareness raising about health or social issues. Some of these evolve into more sustained initiatives, of which there were about 50 in the same year, including community gardens, mental health programs and educational endeavours such as English classes and tutorial assistance.

It is particularly encouraging to see social action emerging from the growth process in the community, especially among groups

of families and neighbourhoods . Over the course of the Nine Year Plan, the National Assembly envisages that some of these efforts will come to be supported by Bahá’í-inspired organisations in each region. Friends in some centres of intense activity are at an early stage of learning about the process of forming and registering an organisation. This year regional social action seminars were held in August 2023 in Perth and in November 2023 in Sydney, bringing together institutions and friends learning about social action at the grassroots, drawing on the content of Book 13 of the Ruhi Institute.

An area of learning for the National Assembly is how social action initiatives and the associated learning can be captured and followed more systematically at the national level. A modest social action desk in the National Secretariat is building capacity to describe what is occurring in this area. It has completed an initial report focussing on three sustained initiatives, one in each region. The National Assembly is now considering next steps in building the capacity of this Desk, including its collaboration with the mechanisms being put in place by Regional Councils to follow social action within their regions.



Food drives, community gardens, neighbourhood clean-ups and educational programs for children are some examples of the social action projects currently happening in the Australian Bahá’í Community.

PARTICIPATION IN THE DISCOURSES OF SOCIETY

Message of the Universal House of Justice dated 28 November 2023:

“[A]t the grassroots in neighbourhoods and villages, and in their professions and other social spaces in which they participate as individuals, the friends are learning to offer concepts from the Bahá’í Writings as a contribution to the evolution of thought and action among their compatriots that is necessary to bring about constructive change”.

Efforts to contribute to social transformation at the level of thought can take place at all levels, from the conversations within a group of families all the way to the national stage. The National Assembly envisages that over the course of the Nine Year Plan we will advance thought in a growing number of key areas starting from social cohesion, the role of youth and the environment, and that in at least some discourses, the Bahá’í community will emerge as a recognised social actor on the national stage, noted for bringing fresh insights, creating new environments and lending impetus to positive social change. This is already becoming a reality in the discourse on social cohesion, where years of efforts by the Office of External Affairs to contribute at the level of thought, informed by the experience gained in community-building at the grassroots, have been acknowledged by government and other social actors both nationally and locally. Our experience of participation in discourse emerging from the growth process, on the other hand, is at an early stage and we currently lack a system for following developments in this area at the grassroots.

The annual report of the Office of External Affairs provides a comprehensive account of its lines of action and achievements in formally contributing to the discourses of society on the national stage on behalf of the Australian Bahá’í community. This included participation in the Department of Home Affairs’ Multicultural Framework Review process through roundtables and a written submission; ongoing contributions to the Australian Human Rights Commission’s Anti-Racism Framework through hosting of roundtables in different localities; and close engagement with the Equality Rights Alliance in preparation for the Office’s participation as part of the Bahá’í International Community’s delegation to the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York, which included co-hosting a space presenting a local Australian setting as a case study for community and institutional collaboration towards equality of women and men. The efforts of the Office resulted in several high profile articles, radio programs, podcasts and news bulletins that reported on the Faith, its beliefs, aims and activities; individual and community initiatives and the role and significance of the House of Worship. The website and social media presence of the Australian Bahá’í Community and that of the Office, are evolving to provide more access to the contributions being made, and lending insights into who we are as a Bahá’í community and what we do. The opportunities open to our community are vast, and the Office has devoted considerable effort to identifying, orienting and accompanying collaborators to assist this work.

The Office of External Affairs is also responsible for lines of action to defend the rights of Bahá’ís experiencing persecution, including representations to government,

civil society, media and online. Significant developments in the past year included opportunities to brief the Australian Ambassador for Human Rights and the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran. New relations forged with the media have resulted in television, radio and online coverage in English and Persian. The Office also seized opportunities to collaborate with institutions and individuals, including through the international “Our Story is One” campaign which was launched in June 2023 with a major Temple service and reception and has stimulated many creative responses in Australia. The National Assembly follows this work closely and, together with the Counsellors, holds an annual one-day seminar with the Office to review its strategy and resourcing. It continues to give priority to supporting and strengthening a relatively new team to ensure that this vital area of endeavour can significantly advance in the course of the Nine Year Plan.

In relation to contributions by individuals or groups to specific fields of thought, an early step the National Assembly has taken in the past year is to put in place a mechanism to follow and document the emergence of special interest groups that form among friends working in a particular profession or field. Such groups, which may arise naturally among those participating in the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity seminars or in other ways, generally study Book 14 together and begin learning about the application of the Teachings to their field. Initial efforts occur at the level of conversation with colleagues and clients, but over time opportunities can be found to contribute in more formal ways such as organising or presenting at spaces, preparing written papers or other forms of content such as podcasts. This area will need to grow significantly to meet the challenge set in the 28 November

message, which notes: “The intellectual life of the community will be cultivated to provide the rigour and clarity of thought required to vindicate to a sceptical humanity the applicability of the healing remedy of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings.”

The National Assembly is also learning about advancing its reading of the reality of the national discourses and identifying key moments in which to guide the friends or to make a contribution as an institution. In relation to the last question, it was helpful to gain experience in the past year in guiding the friends on how to engage in conversations about the referendum on the Voice to Parliament. The National Assembly received a positive response to its letter and the subsequent provision of a Persian translation.



Vignette

Participation in the Discourse of a Profession Perth

At the completion of a Book 14 with approximately 15 healthcare professionals, the participants felt enlightened, inspired and challenged to try and begin to apply what they had learnt. A few General Practitioners were interested to work together and started to think about engaging in discourses in their day to day lives. Initially, they were somewhat daunted by the perception that engaging in discourses meant participating in or organising seminars or panels and they were not yet comfortable to embark of something of that magnitude. However, thinking about how the Bahá'í framework could apply to their day-to-day interactions with patients and colleagues was something they felt able to do.

The group committed to meeting in person every six weeks and tried to identify prevalent topics of discussion with colleagues in their workplaces. Initially mental health was identified as a common conversation, but over time it became clear this was too broad and the group decided to focus their efforts on post-traumatic growth. They began exploring current theories and perspectives and became conscious of how this discourse was being engaged with in their workplaces. Simultaneously they found Writings and guidance to study together, asking how the framework of the Faith differed from the current discourse. Once they had a sense of familiarity, it felt natural to offer learning to their workplaces, in conversations with their colleagues.

Over time the process was influencing how they were approaching their work and strengthening their sense of coherence between their beliefs and their professional lives. They began to think about how the process could benefit others. They invited 20-30 individuals from a diverse range of healthcare professions to a meeting where they shared the journey of the group and their efforts to engage in a prevalent discourse in their field, hoping this could be the impetus for others to undertake a similar initiative. The response was enthusiastic, and a group of psychologists are planning to come together to study Book 14 and begin a similar process.



Healthcare professionals in Perth

Educational Endeavours and the Training Institute

The training institute is central to our efforts to transform society. The National Assembly recognises the dedicated efforts of all those serving the institute in Australia: those serving on Training Institute Boards and their collaborative groups, coordinators from the regional to neighbourhood levels and the many hundreds who give dedicated effort, week by week, in their service as tutors, animators and children's class teachers.

Over the course of the Plan, the 28 November message anticipates:

"The training institute will be further strengthened and will continue to evolve as an educational organization that develops capabilities for service. The seeds it sows within the hearts of succeeding cohorts of young people will be nurtured by other educational opportunities to empower each soul to contribute to social progress and well-being".

The National Assembly's vision is to see that the training institute is accessible to every child, junior youth, youth and adult from the age of five. During this Plan, thousands upon thousands of individuals from all walks of life will be supporting the development of capacity in others through this instrument which is fundamental to our educational endeavour.

The work of all three training institutes in Australia was given impetus by the zonal institute gathering organised in Sydney at the initiative of the Counsellors in March 2023. The zonal gathering is intended to be an annual space at which the network of institutes across Australia, New Zealand and Timor-Leste can come together to reflect on progress, share learning and experience and collaborate. This year's gathering was focussed on strengthening the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program, given its fundamental importance in the growth and life of a cluster, and the promulgation of a more expansive view of the training institute.

The National Assembly is concerned to note a continued pattern of decline in the number of core activities since the start of the Plan, as reflected in the statistics recorded in the Statistical Reporting Program. The charts provided in Appendix C provide a more detailed statistical breakdown. While attention has naturally been given to new strategies and dimensions of the work of the Nine Year Plan, the multiplication of core activities, especially educational activities, remains fundamental to community building and the growth process, whether in the setting of a group of families or network, a neighbourhood, a specific population or a centre of intense activity.

Metric	Devotional Meetings		Children's Classes		Junior Youth Groups		Study Circles		Total		% Diff.
	Apr 23	Apr 24	Apr 23	Apr 24	Apr 23	Apr 24	Apr 23	Apr 24	Apr 23	Apr 24	
Number of Activities	2,170	2,200	440	414	165	190	695	597	3,470	3,401	-2%
Number of Participants	12,494	13,162	3,144	2,748	1,010	1,123	2,857	2,509	19,505	19,542	0.2%
Friends of the Faith	3,729	3,506	2,206	1,993	677	795	720	659	7,332	6,953	-5.2%

As described in the 28 November message:

“Within such programmes of growth, a new pattern of community life emerged, beginning with the multiplication of four core activities that served as portals for the entry of large numbers, combined with a range of other efforts, including individual and collective teaching, visiting homes, hosting social gatherings, observing Feast and Holy Days, administering community affairs, and promoting activities for social and economic development—all of which together would effect a change in the spiritual character of the community and strengthen social ties among individuals and families.”

The National Assembly further notes that our capacity to measure progress is being curtailed by the limited flow of information into SRP. While the system for capturing statistics is working well in some places,

this is not true in all parts of the country and presents a particular challenge in the largest clusters in South-Eastern Australia. A concerted effort is required in the coming year to rebuild capacity and strengthen the system for collecting and maintaining statistics at all levels.

An increasingly prominent strategy across all forms of community-building has been the use of festivals and camps for children, junior youth, youth and families, which help to expand and deliver the materials of the training institute. There has been a proliferation of children’s festivals drawing on the program for the spiritual education of children. The South-Eastern Australia region hosted 51 children’s festivals and 23 junior youth camps this year, with a total attendance exceeding 1000. Camps have proven vital to enabling groups of junior youth to progress, over the course of three years, through ten or more of the texts now available. Further consideration needs to be given to how the progress of individuals engaging with the educational materials in this mode, particularly through children’s festivals, can be tracked and supported.





Vignette

Mbantua and MacDonnell Institute Camp Central Australia

The Mbantua and MacDonnell Institute Camp held in July 2023 in Central Australia welcomed friends from different localities in northern Western Australia, learning together and forming bonds of friendship.

The camp began with a welcome to the country by local friends and some Dreamtime stories about the Seven Sisters and significance of the location of the camp was shared. Each day started with morning devotions followed by five sessions in groups studying Books 1, 2 and 6, one junior youth group and one children's class. Other significant activities were evening reflections and campfires, a picnic for making kangaroo tails and smoking ceremony held at the riverbank, two deepening sessions and a planning session with each group at the end of the camp. These activities helped to strengthen friendship and a sense of oneness among the participants, created a sense of the importance of learning about culture and the distinct practices for Indigenous people in Central Australia, deepened understanding about harmony between science and religion, and built vision for what is possible in each community as well as a plan for the next steps in working toward that vision.

It was observed that more men were starting to actively participate rather than just remaining on the periphery. The friends involved in the process have been empowered to make decisions together and have built capacity to solve



challenging situations in the camp through consultation and collective decision making took place rather than an individual directing people (top down approach).

Participation in this camp helped to facilitate and illustrate what the institute process can mean and do in the community: a very large family all working together in harmony and with open hearts, welcoming others to the community efforts such as camps, not only creates a sense of empowerment for the local community but also helps visiting friends from other clusters see how it can work to make a deeper contribution to the change needed in their local communities. The spirit of unity and discipline helped everyone to have a glimpse of the hard work it takes and how we all need to be united in our vision and work towards our vision through successive cycles of activities.

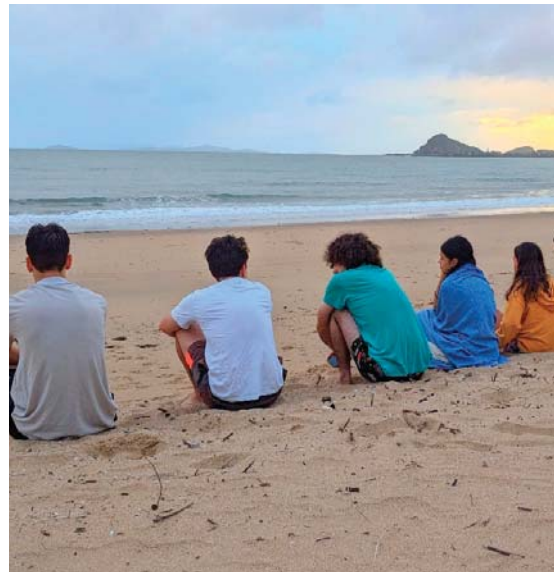


An innovation this year was the development of intensive capacity building programs. The first was established by the training institute in North-Eastern Australia- a 12-week full-time program comprising two weeks of residential study of guidance, history of the Faith and the institute materials, service during expansion phase in local communities for eight weeks, followed by a return for two-week residential study and reflection. This program has been through two intakes in Brisbane and a similar initiative is now under way in Sydney, providing an opportunity for those wishing to serve the Cause with intensity.



Another breakthrough pioneered in North-Eastern Australia and subsequently propagated elsewhere was the content seminar. The 28 December 2021 message states that “A critical requirement is to enable all those contributing to the work of the institute to progressively advance their understanding of the educational content: its objectives, its structure, its pedagogical principles, its methodology, its central concepts, its interconnections.” Following considerable reflection on this need, the first content seminar, held in Brisbane in August, brought experienced tutors together for a two-week study and analysis of the content of Books 1, 2 and 3 in this light. The initial seminar was attended by

representatives of other training institutes who have since trialled a similar approach in their regions.



The learning site for the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program, based in Sydney cluster, has continued to systematise and strengthen its work with a focus on four key lines of action: strengthening the program in the cluster designated as a learning site; fostering a learning process within the network of associated clusters; contributing to developing the capacity of key individuals implementing the program; and working closely with the training institutes and other agencies at the cluster and regional levels. The zonal gathering gave further impetus to the site’s work by directing the attention of all institutes to the centrality of the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program. Two learning seminars organised by the site in the past year brought together key friends advancing the program in the associated clusters, many of whom have themselves emerged from the program and are learning to dedicate many years to its development. Through the seminars learning documents are being produced that capture and share learning more widely.

The youth of Australia are at the helm of all these efforts, supporting the education of



Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) Seminar

those younger than themselves out of a long-term commitment to action and collective social progress. Over the 2023-24 summer period, Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity seminars were held in Sydney, Perth, Melbourne, and Brisbane with a total participation of some 250 young adults. Consideration continues to be given to establishing a fifth unit in Adelaide, removing the need for Adelaide youth to travel to Perth to attend the seminar. In addition, a seminar for graduates and young professionals took place in late December 2023, attended by 31 participants from Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific. The ISGP annual report provides a glimpse into the impact of the seminars on the participants. A strengthened national coordinating team is learning about collaboration with other institutions in identifying and encouraging an expanding pool of Bahá'í youth to attend the seminars, ensuring that participation continues to become part of the culture of the Bahá'í community. The National Assembly sees the potential of the seminars to grow much further and recognises their importance in continuing to strengthen the intellectual life of the community.

The National Assembly's annual retreat on human resource development, together with the Counsellors, has strengthened

as an annual opportunity for deep exploration of the training institute, supplemented by the regular flow of reports prepared by the Training Institute Learning Desk and participation in relevant spaces throughout the year. This year's retreat was held at the Aldinga facility in July, providing an opportunity to meet with friends at the forefront of the training institute in Adelaide cluster. A key strategic focus for the National Assembly is

to strengthen the structures and systems at the national level to enable a number of thoughtful, far-sighted friends to devote a significant proportion of their time and energy to the training institute, guiding its evolution and leading the process of continually refining and adding to its educational content. A further stage to which our attention is now turning is the formalisation and recognition of the institute as a visible and robust educational organisation in Australian society, forging strong ties of collaboration with local government and other educational institutions. A degree of formality will see that each grade and text of the materials for the program for the spiritual education of children and junior youth is readily available in hundreds of neighbourhoods, in some places concurrently at a dedicated facility.



Human Resources Retreat at the Aldinga facility in South Australia

Vignette

Formalisation of the Training Institute Illawarra Cluster, South-Eastern Australia



Children's Classes in Shell Cove, Illawarra

In Shell Cove neighbourhood in the Illawarra Cluster, a group of parents have over the years established strong relationships with the principal of a local school. Their engagement in the various aspects of school life including participating in Parent and Community meetings, engagement in school fundraisers, and involvement in initiatives like the homework club all contributed towards building this relationship. As a result, the principal had come to hold the Bahá'ís in high regard.

In the same area, a number of children's classes were being held in various homes, and the space was becoming insufficient. The team then began to seek other places where classes could be held, initially exploring alternative venues such as hiring halls which proved inadequate. This resulted in conversations being held with the principal concerning using the school premises. The strong relationship that had been developed led to the school generously offering five to six classrooms, free of charge, accommodating some 40 children in the children's classes, with additional attendees joining the end-of-year celebrations.

As the principal began to see the impact these classes were having on the children, he expressed a desire for more families to become engaged with the classes. He turned to the core team and asked what more he could do to offer support, which led to the core team taking steps to introduce the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program for grade 5 and 6 students. There are now three children's classes: Grade 1, Grade 2 and Grade 3. There is also a parents' group who explore concepts from the first to the third books in the main sequence. The families have been engaging in social action by working together on initiating short-term service projects in the neighbourhood.

Raising Capacity for Administration at all Levels

The 28 November message identifies, as one of the tasks immediately before us, that “the capacity of Bahá’í institutions will be fostered at all levels, with particular attention to the establishment and development of Local Assemblies and to enhancing their engagement with the wider society and its leaders”. It further notes:

In carrying out their responsibilities, the institutions facilitate creative and collaborative exchanges among all elements of the community and strive to build consensus, to overcome challenges, to foster spiritual health and vitality, and to determine through experience the most efficacious ways to pursue the community’s aims and purposes”.

The National Assembly is well aware that, in a society where trust in many traditional institutions has eroded, the station and leadership of all these sacred institutions, and the Faith they represent, will gain greater recognition to the extent that they show themselves worthy of their responsibilities, increasingly embodying a new conception of what it means to be called to serve on an institution.

DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLIES

Some 166 Local Spiritual Assemblies were formed at Ridván 2023. These Assemblies are at various stages along the path of development that has been described by the Universal House of Justice, from communities with only nine adult believers to longstanding institutions tending to large and complex communities.

All Local Assemblies now have the opportunity to connect to webinars held twice-yearly by the Local Assembly Development Desk, which was formed in the National Secretariat in 2022. The Desk is preparing to extend the orientation webinars for Assembly Secretaries, which have been held following Ridván for the past two years, to also provide orientation for Assembly Chairpersons and Vice Chairpersons.



The institutions of the learned and the rulers are close collaborators in raising capacity for administration

The National Assembly has prioritised the further strengthening of the Local Assembly Development Desk, which is learning about building capacity in Local Assemblies at different stages on the path of development through following their development in a coherent manner and distilling and disseminating learning. The Local Assembly Development Desk has been asked to focus on those that have advanced furthest along the path in order to capture and disseminate what has been learned, particularly about developing key capacities for sustaining vibrant communities and facilitating the flow of guidance and information. It is evident that those Assemblies that are making use of periodic retreats, giving significant time to studying guidance, following systematic learning processes and collaborating closely with Auxiliary Board members are able to make notable advances in a relatively short space of time.



At Ridván 2023, four additional Assemblies adopted two-stage elections, bringing the total in Australia to seven: Blacktown, Brisbane, Gold Coast, Manningham, Parramatta, Stirling and The Hills Shire. With support from the Desk, the Secretaries of these Assemblies, which are managing a high level of complexity, have met periodically over the course of the year and reflected on three shared learning objectives related to groups of families, developing administrative capacity and the two-stage election process itself. Currently no other Assemblies have reached the threshold at which a two-stage election would be timely. However, educational materials on Bahá'í elections that were developed for two-stage elections have been trialled, refined and made available to all Local Assemblies to help foster conversation in the community about the formation of the Local Assembly and its purpose, and assist in sustaining those conversations year after year. The National Assembly is also

giving priority to updating resources and reference materials for Local Assemblies, noting that the LSA Handbook is in need of substantial revision.

The National Assembly and Regional Councils are learning about bringing groups of Assemblies together in learning processes related to aspects of growth and spiritual health. We have observed that such opportunities are generally welcomed by Assemblies, which gain new insights and approaches to apply to their own work and functioning. The National Assembly envisages that many more Assemblies will be brought into being as a result of the growth of the community in regional and rural settings over the course of the Nine Year Plan. In 2023, a project was undertaken under the auspices of the Local Assembly Development Desk to identify those localities with nine or more adults where Assemblies could form, and endeavours are being made to assist them to do so.



Vignette

Advancing Along the Path of Development *Marion Local Spiritual Assembly, Adelaide*

Through engagement with the Spiritual Health program, members of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Marion, the largest Bahá'í community in South Australia, became aware that their time was spent mostly on administrative tasks and that time for capacity building, teaching activities and wider connection was sacrificed. They also noticed that the mode of consultation had slipped to permitting expressions of fixed opinions. In 2021 the Assembly faced a complex protection case through which it learnt that consultation and collaboration with the Auxiliary Board member, daily if required, was effective and fostered loving interactions, new learning and successful outcomes.

In early 2022, reinvigorated with new membership and a humble posture of learning, the Assembly identified its primary aims and agreed that increased teaching efforts and community engagement were needed. It also realised that to achieve these aspirations, deeper collaboration with the cluster agencies was required. The Assembly increased the frequency of their meetings to weekly, dedicating the extra time to investing in its own development by studying guidance, to teaching efforts and growth across the cluster.

In October 2022, a three-day weekend retreat was held between the Local Assembly and Auxiliary Board members for Protection and Propagation, covering the joy of serving on an institution, a review of the spiritual health framework and its application to its local community, the Training Institute, the Nine Year Plan, and groups of families which was the focus of the final session on action planning. Since then, the Assembly has gone from strength to strength. At the second retreat, held in June 2023, the Assembly reflected on the reality of the community and what further progress was required and made plans for a “rock-up” home-visit campaign to which all Assembly members wholeheartedly committed. Over a weekend, 39 visits took place, with both short and long conversations occurring, resulting in the generation of much spiritual energy and love within the community, and an increase in attendance at Holy Day celebrations.

Vignette

Experience gained through advancing learning processes, *Local Spiritual Assembly of Brisbane*

In December 2022, following the first two-stage election, the Local Spiritual Assembly of Brisbane held its first retreat together with Auxiliary Board members to discuss ways to strengthen unity of vision and collaboration in thought and action, particularly related to the station and role of the Assembly. The Assembly members recognised that “the necessary time and resources” needed to be made available to advance the Faith in its locality.

Aware of the need for a systematic process for action and learning, two objects of learning were arrived at:

1. How do we strengthen the process and culture of dissemination, study and application of the guidance of the Universal House of Justice?
2. How do we nurture a culture of teaching and strengthen the desire and capacity of the friends to engage in effective conversations about the Faith and the institute process?

The Feast was identified as a valuable space to advance learning about both questions and the sector officers’ task was to document the outcomes of the consultations at the Feast and communicate them back to the Assembly. Later, a retreat for sector officers and assistants to the Auxiliary Board was arranged, to create an atmosphere and environment that fostered operating in a learning mode rather than a task-based mode. The plan decided on was to strengthen family groups and create spaces to study the guidance. Having a clear and actionable plan for each sector helped inject energy and vibrancy into the community.

Cluster Reflection Meeting in Brisbane



Frameworks were developed to advance the learning process in different areas of community life. For example, in consultation with the junior youth coordinator and the Auxiliary Board member, a series of workshops were organised for parents



Sector officers in Brisbane

to study the guidance around the education and empowerment of young age groups. To strengthen the interaction between the Assembly and the Board members, fortnightly meetings were commenced to discuss progress on the two identified objects of learning. The Assembly incorporated items from the learning processes in its weekly meetings, resulting in a more systematic approach and greater alignment of the weekly agenda with the goals of the Nine Year Plan. Results are being seen in the inclusion of the objects of learning at Feasts; youth empowered to consult with adults at Feasts; sector officers increasingly operating in a mode of learning; increased participation in studying the guidance; and a strengthening of the culture of home visits. Future plans are to possibly further narrow down the learning objectives, accompany the sector officers and investigate the most effective ways of providing flow-on information to the community.

To date the Assembly has held three weekend retreats with the Auxiliary Board members. This has greatly contributed to the relationship between the Spiritual Assembly and the Appointed Arm. Mutual love and respect and a closeness is seen in the ease, frequency, and nature of interactions between the two institutions.

Community building activity in Brisbane



REGIONAL BAHÁ'Í COUNCILS

The National Assembly envisages that Regional Bahá'í Councils will shoulder growing responsibilities over the course of the Plan as their level of functioning rises, including further accompaniment of the local institutions, social action and involvement in the discourses of society, and management of funds and properties in each region that are indispensable to the growth process. The annual reports from each Council provide an overview of the work they have been overseeing over the past year.

A Regional Councils Desk in the National Secretariat is assisting the National Assembly to follow the progress and development of Councils more systematically. Over the past year, the National Assembly has observed strengthened implementation at regional level of the various national systems, especially the national financial system, in all three regions. There are national-regional collaborative teams following the development of the financial system, collection and use of statistics and the national human resources system. There is strong collaboration and shared learning processes involving the respective office

bearers of the Councils which is facilitated by the National Assembly, including weekly gatherings of the Secretaries and an annual Secretaries' retreat, regular meetings of the Treasurers in the national financial system team, and periodic spaces for the Chairpersons and Vice Chairpersons to reflect on their roles.

The annual Council gathering, hosted by the National Assembly in collaboration with the Counsellors, was held in Sydney in early December 2023, immediately

following their election. The National Assembly provided a vision for the development of the country over the Nine Year Plan, within which the Councils are advancing their work. Collective areas of learning reviewed at the gathering related to groups of families, movement of clusters, regional pioneering systems, sub-regional arrangements, operation of Regional Councils and their offices, development of the financial system, development of the training institute, and supporting the spiritual health and wellbeing of those serving with intensity, including their own members. It was evident that considerable advances had occurred and the approach to learning processes in the regions is increasingly systematic.



NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY

The demands of the Nine Year Plan call for all institutions to raise their level of functioning. The National Assembly has identified specific objects of learning around its own functioning: How is the Assembly strengthening its capacity to perform its work in a mode of learning? How is the Assembly making adjustments to enable it to focus effectively on matters of strategy? How to manage the growing volume and complexity of work that lies before the institution? And what is the National Assembly learning about supporting the well-being of its members and their families as they serve with intensity?

Since its election at last year's National Convention, the National Assembly has held 39 meetings at time of writing. It has also continued its rhythm of weekly study sessions, other than the weeks before and after the main meetings. Collaboration with the Counsellors is strong and loving, including quarterly joint meetings and two annual retreats addressing human resource development and spiritual health, held this year in Adelaide and Canberra respectively. The National Assembly held its out of town meeting in Perth in January 2024, including a gathering with the community and other associated spaces. Appendix A provides further details regarding the functioning of the National Assembly in the past year. The National Assembly is mindful of the demands that intense service place on its members and expresses its deep appreciation for the support that is provided to members by their families and communities.

In striving to operate in a mode of learning, the National Assembly continues to follow specific learning questions across its various areas of responsibility and has established a regular rhythm of review across the year to consider the advances, challenges, learning and adjustments needed in each area. A recent analysis comparing the agenda of the National Assembly in 2023 to that in 2018 found that the number of meetings and the volume of agenda items remains similar, but

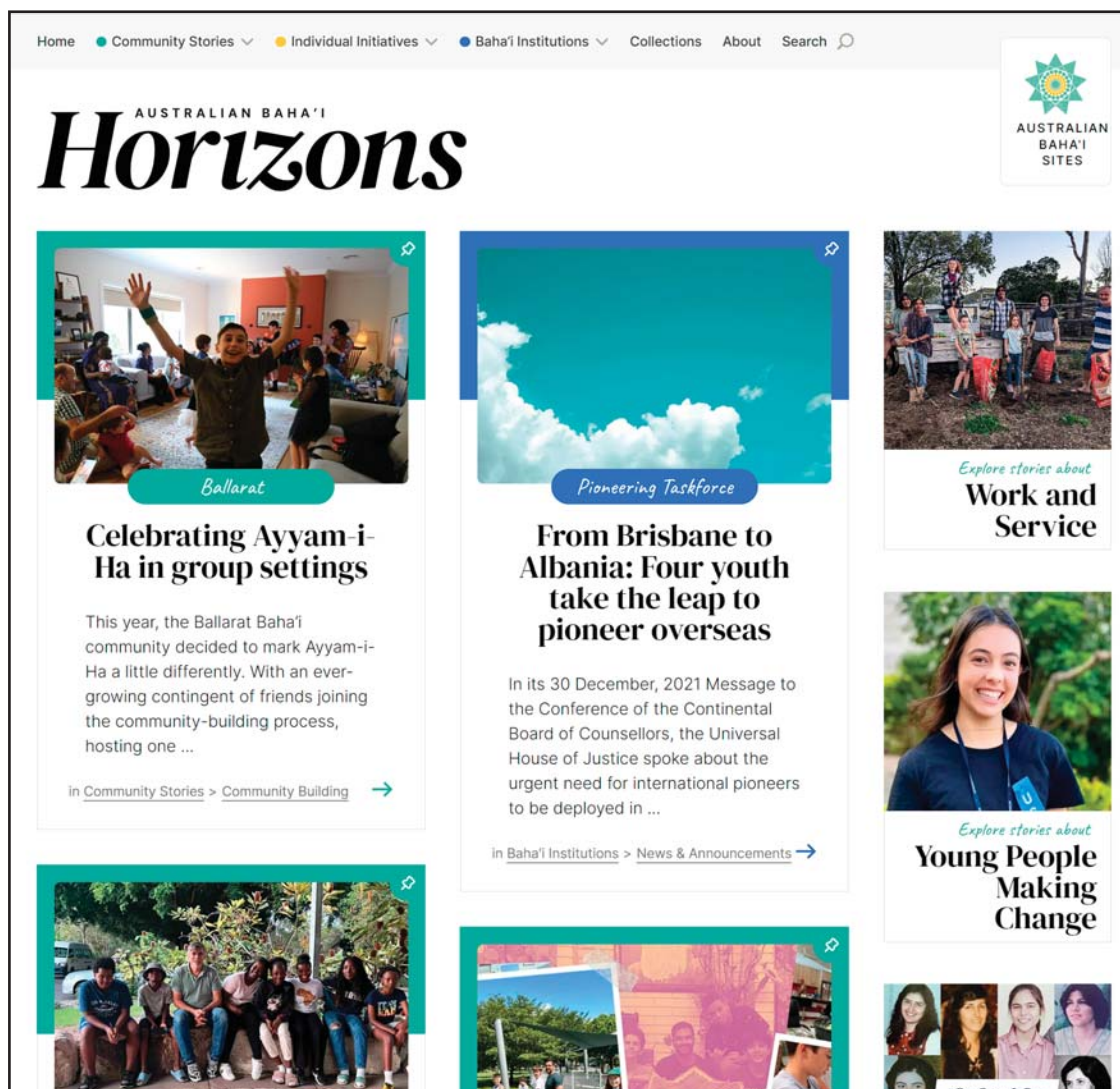
significantly more proactive and strategic matters are now being considered, and fewer reactive ones. A factor that has assisted the shift in the functioning of the Assembly is the continued service of an Assistant Secretary, an arrangement that has enabled the work to be planned more strategically, focus to be maintained on important lines of action, lines of action to be increased and work to be progressed at a faster pace.

The National Assembly has developed a framework document that articulates key aspects of its functioning (the framework document). This is drawn upon by the Assembly in its annual orientation process held in conjunction with the first main meeting to strengthen unity of vision and build the capacity of all members. As part of the process of systematisation, this year terms of reference were finalised for the roles of Chair, Vice Chair and Treasurer.

FLOW OF GUIDANCE AND INFORMATION

In last year's report, the National Assembly shared that it had completed a framework document on the flow of guidance and information and the operation of the National Secretariat, which identified high priorities and next steps. A recent progress review found that the majority of the adjustments were advancing and several completed.

The new Australian Bahá'í Horizons website and news service launched to the community at Naw-Rúz 2024, is intended to assist the flow of guidance, information and inspiration to all those engaged in the community-building process in Australia. The National Assembly is deeply grateful to the small team of friends who have dedicated their professional skills, time and resources to this initiative, which replaces the quarterly print newsletter. A smaller number of newsletters will continue to be disseminated to Bahá'ís-only as required and for those friends who lack reliable access to email or the internet, a periodic hard copy digest will continue to be mailed out on request.



Australian Bahá'í Horizons Website

The National Assembly has considered the results of the survey on the flow of guidance conducted in 2023, which found that over 90% of respondents had received and read the Ridván message, but only about half had the opportunity to study it in a small group. The National Assembly has encouraged Local Assemblies to give attention to the creation of such spaces. Feedback from the survey has also resulted in the trialling of WhatsApp as a supplementary channel for the flow of communication to Local Assemblies via their Secretaries.

Much remains to be implemented and the National Assembly continues to learn about developing effective tools and approaches in facilitating the outflow of information and connecting as many hearts as possible

to the framework for action and how the three protagonists are interacting with the guidance disseminated by the National Assembly and the role of the institute in this regard.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATIONAL HAZÍRATU'L-QUDS

Strengthening the National Secretariat and broader National Office is fundamental to raising the administrative capacity of the National Assembly. In light of its vital role in the system for the flow of guidance and information, the framework document includes a chapter on the development of the National Secretariat which identifies multiple high priority adjustments, most

of which have been completed or are well under way. For the coming year, the highest priorities for the National Assembly are putting in place an IT strategy and governance structure and additional IT support, enhancing the information management systems for the National Office to replace outdated systems, and further strengthening the Office of Personnel.

The National Assembly has been learning about supporting and seeing the pool of human resources serving in the Office expand commensurate with the growth process and framework of the Plan. Over the past two years, the pool of human resources serving the National Office has increased and all but a few key positions have been filled. The National Assembly has been pleased to observe the increased capacity for analysis, planning and budgeting, and responsiveness across most areas of the Office. Attention continues to be paid to building capacity and supporting the development and wellbeing of staff, who serve sacrificially and, in many cases voluntarily. The National Assembly takes this opportunity to warmly acknowledge all those new, ongoing and departing staff who have served the various teams in the Secretariat and broader National Office over the past year.

Our country is blessed with many capable human resources and our systems for engaging friends in a suitable path of service at the local, cluster, regional, national or international level need to be continuously strengthened. In February 2024 the National Assembly was pleased to host a visit by a representative of the Office of Personnel from the Bahá'í World Centre, who travelled to Australia at the request of the Universal House of Justice to enhance awareness about the various service opportunities and critical needs at the World Centre. Mr Riaz Rafat addressed more than 900 friends during his visit to most major cities. The 28 November 2023 message describes how the Universal House of Justice has benefited from "a continuous stream of volunteers to establish the departments and agencies vital to a rapidly developing Faith". We can all be proud that Australia has been the national community with the highest percentage of its members offering service at the World Centre, and the National Assembly is keen to ensure this continues to be the case.

Staff of the National Office at the Annual Orientation and Training Day



INSTITUTION OF THE MASHRIQU'L-ADHKÁR

In the past year, responsibility for the development, care and maintenance of the House of Worship, its grounds and other buildings on the Temple property was vested in a new Office of Facilities. This transition has enabled the Temple Board, which previously held these responsibilities, to focus on learning about its strategic role in supporting the Temple Director in planning and overseeing the operations of the House of Worship and building its relationship with the Bahá'í community and wider society, such that the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár can increasingly take its place as a spiritual centre of the community and contribute towards the release of the society-building power of the Faith. The National Assembly takes this opportunity to recognise the dedicated service of the outgoing and continuing members of the Board as well as the new members who have energetically taken up service in this capacity.

The new Temple Director commenced service in January 2024 and has focussed on collaboration with other institutions and agencies to advance the learning process around the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár as the spiritual centre of the community. In late January, the Director had the opportunity to attend a gathering at the Bahá'í World Centre which brought together Resource Persons and Temple Directors from 14 Houses of Worship to exchange learning and experience globally. The Board and Director are focussing on four key objectives: developing a heightened sense of ownership among various communities and populations, establishing a sustained relationship with teaching and community building activities in Sydney cluster, enhancing the experience of visitors, and strengthening the administrative and operational functioning of the House of Worship. Further details can be found in the annual report of the Temple Board.





The National Assembly itself will continue to learn how it can assist the Board, Director and Office of Facilities to work collaboratively towards a common vision; how to ensure adequate and capable human resourcing is in place to effectively manage the operation, maintenance and development of the House of Worship and surrounds; and how we can increasingly draw on the institute in enhancing the experience of visitors and connecting them to the community-building process.

In addition to supporting the new arrangements, the National Assembly's other priorities around the House of Worship are to complete development of the Master Plan and support the Dayspring of Light project. The Master Planning process has entered its third and final stage of design delivery, now led by a taskforce reporting to the National Assembly. The Development Application for the Dayspring of Light project has been submitted to the Northern Beaches Council and approvals are currently being awaited before this major project to replace the Temple steps, restore the edifice and beautify the surrounding tranquillity zone can proceed. Once all approvals have been given, the National Assembly will be able to share the design more widely and to intensify education efforts in the community, encouraging friends to contribute towards the Dayspring of Light fund launched one year ago. It will also notify the community when there is a clear timeframe for the commencement of works, which will entail an extended period of closure of our beloved House of Worship. The eventual re-opening will provide a once-in-a-generation opportunity to re-introduce the Temple to the wider community it serves at the local, national and continental levels.

Rendering of the new design for the House of Worship, in accordance with the Dayspring of Light project

PROPERTIES OF THE FAITH

Property plays an increasingly important role as we advance in the Nine Year Plan. The highest priority of the National Assembly has been the securing of residential institute properties accessible to each major city. In addition to regional-level needs, the National Assembly envisages an increasing number of Local Assemblies will manage their own properties, offices and staff as their work and responsibilities multiply over the course of the Plan. There is also an emerging need for dedicated facilities in some of the most advanced centres of intense activity. As the property holdings of the National Assembly and the Faith continue to grow, the requirements for developing and managing property become more complex, including legal and compliance issues. These are among the considerations that impelled the National Assembly to appoint a National Property Committee in 2021, which has completed the first two years of its functioning.

Since the acquisition of the Mt Morton and Aldinga facilities, which now serve Victoria and South Australia respectively, the remaining priorities for residential institute facilities are in Queensland and Western Australia. In early 2024, through the vision and generosity of the Gold Coast Local Assembly and community, contracts were exchanged on a property in Merrimac which will become the Gold Coast Bahá'í Centre of Learning. This facility will serve as a sub-regional Bahá'í Centre of Learning as well as a local Haziratu'l-Quds for the Gold Coast Bahá'í community. It will also help support the needs of the wider region in the short to medium term until a regional institute facility is secured elsewhere in Southeast Queensland. This follows a decision of the National Assembly to sell land in the Logan City area, south of Brisbane, that has proven unsuitable for a training institute. With respect to Western Australia, at the time of writing a taskforce appointed by the Bahá'í

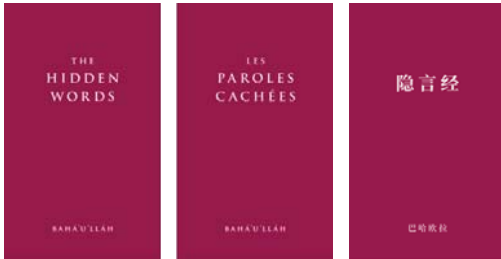
Council for Western and Central Australia is exploring potential properties to meet the need for a residential facility to serve Perth and Western Australia. The National Assembly is therefore optimistic that this long-standing goal will be achieved in the first phase of the Nine Year Plan.

Progress on the new regional Bahá'í centre for Victoria in Vermont has been slow this year, impacted by lengthy delays in approval processes among other factors. At time of writing the National Assembly is in the process of signing a contract with a commercial firm to manage the demolition of the existing property, preliminary to engagement of a project manager to prepare and supervise the delivery of the new centre.

As part of an ongoing project mapping the graves of distinguished believers, the National Assembly secured into perpetuity the graves of Percy Almond and Hilda Brooks, members of the first National Spiritual Assembly of Australia and New Zealand, which were under threat of being re-used. Recognising that it is a national responsibility to ensure that the gravesites of Mother and Father Dunn and Effie Baker are tended appropriately and official visits to their resting places are conducted with reverence and dignity, the National Assembly has appointed a new committee which has been tasked with these responsibilities.

The National Assembly is committed to continuing to learn about how the National Property Committee can be supported to advance a national learning process around property; how the properties of the Faith are best utilised to support the growth process, especially the use of property for the training institute; and how institutional capacity is being built at regional and local levels for development and maintenance of properties that constitute seats for Regional Councils and some Local Assemblies.

FLOW OF LITERATURE



The National Assembly has vested responsibility for advancing our national system for the flow of literature in the Distribution and Publication Board, which oversees the publication program as well as the operation of the Bahá'í Distribution Service. Since announcing the re-commencement of a publishing program, the Board has accepted and published a small number of new titles. With a focus on materials that complement the institute materials and directly meet the needs of the growth process in Australia, the Board is leading the development of publications that support specific cultural and linguistic groups, such as bilingual prayer books, as well as resources supporting the engagement of younger generations in the activities associated with the institute. It has also initiated a conversation with Australian authors about their publishing aspirations.

In the past year the distribution service transitioned to a new warehouse and third party logistics service which is located next to Ingram, our print-on-demand printer, which has allowed print-on-demand titles to be quickly and easily picked up and moved to the warehouse for prompt dispatch. The Board has also taken steps to foster greater reflection and exchange of learning between Bahá'í bookshops, a key element of the national distribution

system, by facilitating a six-monthly virtual gathering of managers and other representatives of Bahá'í bookshops from across Australia. A few distinctive concerns and areas of learning have emerged from the first two gatherings. At its annual meeting with the Board in January 2024, the National Assembly noted high level of functioning of the Board and the advances in its work over the past year.

SPIRITUAL HEALTH

"The destructive forces that buffet the world do not leave the Bahá'í community untouched. Indeed, the history of every national Bahá'í community bears their mark. As a result, in various places and at various times, the progress of a particular community was retarded by insidious social tendencies or temporarily restricted or even extinguished by opposition".

Message of the Universal House of Justice 28 November 2023

Reading our own reality through the lens of the above passage from the 28 November message, we observe that the most powerful forces impacting our own community are not war or revolution, but more insidious. Strong prevailing currents of consumerism are intensifying in Australian society, underpinned by an all-pervasive materialism. Family breakdown and weakened ties of community have coincided with high rates of loneliness and an epidemic of mental health issues, sometimes manifesting in patterns of violence and abuse. In this context, we should not be surprised that we are all being tested spiritually: every community, every institution, every individual.

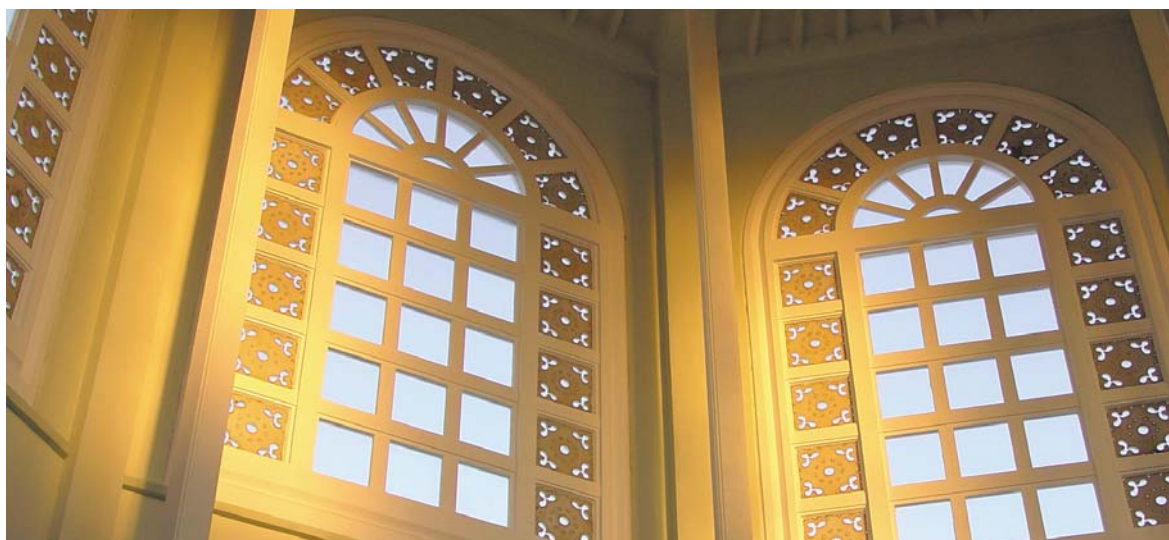
Ongoing consideration needs to be given to ways of fortifying the faith of the believers, preserving the unity of the community, and

detecting and responding appropriately to attacks on the Faith. In recent years the National Assembly has advanced a number of learning processes related to spiritual health, which are reviewed annually at a joint retreat with the Counsellors. At the most recent retreat, held in Canberra in October 2023, consideration was given to learning processes under way in relation to fostering unity and responding to disunity; analysing patterns of resignations and processes to support reaffirmation; and work being undertaken with groups of Local Assemblies to advance the development of educational content, manage very large communities, and deal with mental health issues. All these processes, some of which are touched upon below, aim to build the capacities our Bahá'í institutions require for analysis and documentation of learning about spiritual health; for sustaining vibrant communities and responding to threats and challenges; and for delivering educational content that strengthens the spiritual health of the community.

Following an analysis of resignations from the Faith undertaken in 2022, which noted certain patterns among resignations occurring in recent years, and in light of guidance received in October 2023 from the Universal House of Justice suggesting how this project might be extended, the National Assembly and Counsellors have

initiated a shared learning process on the spiritual tests that lead to individuals distancing themselves from the Faith, and how local communities can be assisted to identify the early signs and respond in a timely and appropriate manner. This learning process is still in an initial stage of data collection.

In 2022, the National Assembly initiated a process to learn from Local Assemblies that had adopted systematic approaches towards supporting junior youth with a family background in the Faith on the pathway to reaffirmation. Experience and learning shared by ten selected Local Assemblies affirmed the importance of Local Assemblies engaging early and meaningfully with junior youth and their families, and the benefits of a systematic and planned education process to smooth the path towards reaffirmation. Insights from the learning captured to date have been shared with all Local Assemblies via a webinar and a letter, which invited them to add to the learning by completing the questionnaire capturing their experience in supporting the reaffirmation process. The National Assembly is particularly interested to learn about how the Bahá'í-specific texts now available for the junior youth spiritual empowerment program (Spirit of Faith, Power of the Holy Spirit and Rays of Light) can help to fortify spiritual health. This will contribute towards a



broader object of learning about how we are drawing on the training institute to build capacity in this area – for individuals, institutions and communities. Over the long term, it is the advances at the level of culture resulting from the unfoldment and intensification of the institute process that will enable the community to actively counter the forces of disintegration in our society.

The aim of building capacity in Local Assemblies to sustain vibrant communities and respond to threats and challenges was the primary purpose of the Spiritual Health Program set in motion in 2017, which remains available to Assemblies that would benefit from it. One of its greatest achievements has been to strengthen the relationship between Local Spiritual Assemblies and the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, who served as the facilitators. In 2023 a “learning hub” has been established in Adelaide comprising a small number of Local Assemblies which had completed the program and are now being supported to come together periodically to reflect on the capacities they have gained through the original program and the next capacities they will be supported to build. It is hoped this “hub” will, over time, help develop three or four modules that could assist Assemblies at different stages of development.

Arising from a comprehensive review of our framework for child safety and child protection, the National Assembly has also approved a training program to build capacity in Local Assemblies responding to domestic and family violence, which is being made available to Local Assemblies on request with the support of a taskforce of experienced friends.

Recognising the prevalence of mental health issues in our society, the National Assembly has invited a small team, based in Perth, to follow learning about building capacity in Local Assemblies to deal with the impact of such issues on

individuals, institutions and communities. The team initially piloted with four Local Assemblies a workshop to build capacity in recognising, responding and knowing where to refer friends with mental health issues. Following reflection and refinement, a further workshop was held in early 2024 with additional Assemblies in Perth, with a view to eventually making it more widely available. The National Assembly is interested to learn about initiatives relating to mental health taking place in different parts of the country in order to gain a better understanding of the most pressing needs and priorities in this area, and what capacities need to be built in institutions or groups.

FINANCIAL SYSTEM

Providing greater support to Local Assemblies was also a focus of the Office of Treasury and Finance in the past year. The establishment of a dedicated Local Assembly support team enabled the Office to become more proactive in building capacity for financial administration at the local level by offering training and practical assistance to local treasurers. It also expanded the capacity of the Office to respond to queries from Local Assemblies. More broadly, efforts to recruit additional capable human resources continued commensurate with the ongoing development of specialisation within the Office, particularly in the areas of accounting, budgeting and insurance which advanced notably over the course of the year. As of this writing, 17 friends are serving 10 specialised areas within the Office, four of them core staff who are giving significant time to the work of the Office, whilst others are volunteering some of their time. As well as weekly meetings of the core team with the National Treasurer, other periodic gatherings, including quarterly reflection meetings, provide an opportunity for all treasury staff to remain connected, consult about progress, and think about objectives that need to be pursued in the period ahead.

Significant effort was made throughout the year, in collaboration with the Regional Councils, to explore new approaches and generate new insights and experiences in relation to Fund education. These efforts were primarily focused on learning about working with individuals, groups of families, and special populations such as young professionals. Other notable developments in the financial system include a consultative gathering of friends with banking expertise which aimed to strengthen the National Assembly's relationship with financial institutions; collaboration with the Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh to develop a new chapter in the financial system document dedicated to the administration of Huqúqu'lláh; further formalisation of policies and procedures

related to financial controls; and efficiency gains resulting from the automation of financial data exchange with the bank.

The Office plans to continue its careful adoption of automation to simplify, modernise, and strengthen a growing number of internal systems and processes. It also hopes to establish a new internal portfolio dedicated to compliance and governance. A frontier of learning that will continue to be pursued is how to benefit from the experience of training institutes in the ongoing development of the national financial system, and in particular efforts to raise consciousness among the believers about contributing to the funds as a fundamental element of Bahá'í life.



Concluding Remarks

Dearest friends, this report has shown there is much to celebrate and a strong basis for confidence. Our community is rich in spiritual, human and material resources, and much is being learned. We live in a country blessed with many of the elements that underpin a stable and peaceful social order: robust democracy, material abundance, and a proud ethos of justice and equality. The Australian people constitute an ever-growing tapestry, and the Australian Bahá'í community is increasingly gaining strength and richness from friends who bring the cultural resources of all humanity. Our connection with the Covenant is felt more than ever before, strengthened through a culture of continuous study of the guidance of the Universal House of Justice reaching all those connected with the community-building process.

While we are clear-eyed about the challenges before us and do not underestimate the forces of disintegration, we are assured that “[t]he process of integration will also accelerate, knitting together ever more closely the efforts of those who are learning to translate Bahá'u'lláh's teachings into reality with those in the wider society who seek justice and peace”. Further, “a new way of life is taking shape, distinguished by its devotional character; the commitment of youth to education and service; purposeful conversation among families, friends, and acquaintances on themes of spiritual and social import; and collective endeavours for material and social progress ... The Bahá'í community, in striving to systematically execute the three Divine Charters, has become a new creation, as anticipated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.”

As we look forward to the fulfilment of our plans and aspirations in the year ahead, please join us in praying to Almighty God to bless, assist and sustain our efforts.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia



Appendix A

Functioning of the National Spiritual Assembly

MEMBERSHIP

The following believers were elected to the National Spiritual Assembly in 180 B.E., with the election conducted at National Convention on 20 May 2023:

Shayan Ta'i	86 votes
Kia Manouchehri	79 votes
Natalie Mobini-Kesheh.....	79 votes
Reena Torabi	76 votes
Christopher Heggie.....	63 votes
Saloomah Mohebbaty.....	51 votes
Fiona Scott	49 votes
Anton Jones	45 votes
Lalomilo Tauveve.....	16 votes

ELECTION OF OFFICE BEARERS

The newly elected National Spiritual Assembly elected its officer bearers at its first main meeting which took place from 1-4 June 2023. The following members were elected as the National Assembly's officers for 180 B.E.:

Chairperson	Shayan Ta'i
Secretary	Natalie Mobini-Kesheh
Treasurer	Kia Manouchehri
Vice Chairperson	Christopher Heggie
Assistant Secretary (Appointed by National Spiritual Assembly).....	Reena Torabi



MEETING MANAGEMENT

Most main meetings of the National Assembly were carried out in-person at the National Bahá'í Centre. One main meeting was held at the Western Australia Bahá'í Centre of Learning in Perth over the weekend of 19-21 January 2024. On three occasions when travel was required to attend retreats or other gatherings in the same month, the main meetings were held online.

Since its election, the National Assembly has met 39 times up to and including its 22-24 March 2024 main meeting, comprising its inaugural meeting at National Convention, 10 three-day main meetings and 28 tele-meetings, four of which were full-day meetings and the remainder evening meetings. At the time of writing, three remaining tele-meetings were scheduled prior to National Convention. In addition, the National Assembly continued the practice of devoting a regular weekday evening to collective study of guidance.

Main meetings were generally held from Friday to Sunday, tele-meetings were held on weekday evenings between the main meetings, and the full-day meetings took place online on a Sunday. At every main meeting, the National Assembly supplicated divine assistance, and remembered individuals and institutions of the Faith from a prepared prayer list.

Beyond attending the meetings, members contribute to the work of the National Assembly in many other ways including participation in learning teams, attending national and regional spaces and visiting advanced clusters.

The National Assembly continued its strong and loving collaboration with the liaison Counsellors for Australia, to whom it turns as the National Assembly's closest collaborators. The National Assembly met with the Counsellors on numerous

occasions, and jointly participated in two retreats in July 2023 and October 2023 regarding human resource development and spiritual health, held in Adelaide and Canberra respectively. Regular consultations and meetings occurred with one or more individual Counsellors on specific matters. The quarterly meetings with the Counsellors generally incorporated a morning tea with staff of the National Office.

MEETINGS WITH OTHER INSTITUTIONS AND AGENCIES

The National Assembly met with Mr Stephen and Mrs Dicy Hall upon their return to Australia following their service to the Universal House of Justice in the Bahá'í World Centre.

During its February 2024 main meeting, the National Assembly and Counsellors met with a member of the Office of Personnel from the Bahá'í World Centre, Mr Riaz Rafat, during his visit to Australia, to gain insights and learnings from the various meetings he held.

The National Assembly hosted the Regional Bahá'í Council gathering, held 1-3 December 2023 at the Sydney Bahá'í Centre of Learning and in the grounds of the House of Worship. The National Assembly met separately with each Regional Bahá'í Council in the course of the gathering, and representatives of the National Assembly held meetings with individual Regional Bahá'í Councils and national agencies throughout the year as the need arose.

In conjunction with the retreats and meetings held outside of Sydney, the National Assembly took the opportunity to meet with institution and agency members and friends serving the respective clusters, including a large gathering with the Perth community in January 2024 to which friends from across Western Australia were invited.

The National Assembly met throughout the year with various institutions and agencies including the Board of Trustees for Huqúqu'lláh, Office of External Affairs, Office of the Network of Learning Sites and the Learning Site for the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program, Training Institute Learning Desk, ISGP national coordinating team, Growth and Development Team, National Property Committee and the Distribution and Publication Board.

The National Assembly met and prayed together with each international pioneer shortly prior to their deployment to one of Australia's goal countries for the Nine Year Plan. These devotionals, held in conjunction with the National Assembly's online study sessions, were a treasured part of the last year.

The National Assembly was represented at conferences organised by the Board of Trustees for Huqúqu'lláh.

AGENDA MANAGEMENT

The work of the National Assembly continued throughout 180 B.E. with efficiency, and a spirit of learning through experience. Agenda management, continued work by the Assistant Secretary, the contribution of Regional Bahá'í Councils and the work of the National Secretariat has greatly assisted this process and enabled the National Assembly to stay on top of its agenda and give priority to matters of a strategic nature.

A review of the nature of agenda items was carried out late in 2023. The National Assembly has observed that matters for consultation at the main meetings have become more strategic in nature, informed by good quality analysis, and a strong rhythm has been established for the review of key areas of learning across the year.

During its meetings throughout the year the National Assembly considered and made resolutions on 439 agenda items (as

at the 22-24 March 2024 main meeting). At time of writing, decisions from 381 agenda items had been implemented by the staff of the National Office. Decisions arising from 58 agenda items (7.5%) were still in the process of being actioned, a large percentage of which were decisions made in the preceding month or decisions of a strategic nature requiring longer implementation time.

Learning has continued throughout the year working with an off-the-table agenda to consider and manage routine matters. These include such matters as the approval of minutes, re-appointments and regular reports from entities in the National Secretariat and agencies of the National Assembly. These matters are incorporated into a dedicated part of the main meeting minutes. Of the 439 agenda items considered throughout the year, 84 were considered as part of the off-the-table agenda, freeing up the consultation to be more strategic in nature and allowing more time for deeper consultation on other issues at main meetings.

MEETING ATTENDANCE

All members of the National Assembly are wholehearted in their service. The National Assembly continues to have a high level of participation by members attending its meetings. As of the 22-24 March 2024 main meeting, the National Assembly held 39 meetings with an average attendance of 93%. Individual absences were due to professional, service and family commitments, international travel, illness or caring responsibilities and leave of absence for personal reasons.

Members of the National Assembly continued to engage in spaces arranged in the regions and clusters by the Regional Bahá'í Councils aimed at supporting the work of the Cause, such as Regional Institutional Meetings and regional planning and budgeting gatherings.

Appendix B

Overall Composition & Growth of the Australian Bahá'í Community

The Australian Bahá'í Community had a net increase of 217 people from 21,434 at the end of 179 B.E. to 21,651 at the end of 180 B.E. There were 68 enrolments, a 21% decrease compared to last year. 93 young Bahá'ís reaffirmed their faith in Bahá'u'lláh during the year, but 75 did not reaffirm by age 18. The number of Local Spiritual Assemblies at the end of 180 B.E. was 166.

Year Ending	175 B.E. 20/03/2019	176 B.E. 19/03/2020	177 B.E. 19/03/2021	178 B.E. 20/03/2022	179 B.E. 20/03/2023	180 B.E. 19/03/2024
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Individuals & Families at the Beginning of the Year

Address known	15,549	15,638	16,024	16,138	16,192	16,246
Address unknown	4,748	4,825	4,926	4,991	5,073	5,188
Total Bahá'ís	20,297	20,463	20,950	21,129	21,265	21,434

Add (during the year)

Enrolments	122	103	117	98	86	68
Reaffirmations <i>*Not included in sub total</i>	109	90	94	93	87	93
Births	129	83	112	121	79	30
Transfers In	269	598	242	185	315	236
Adjustment	0	7	87	8	-5	160
Sub-total of additions	520	791	478	412	475	494
Sub Total	20,817	21,254	21,428	21,541	21,740	21,928

Subtract (during the year)

Resignations	57	26	30	43	26	37
Youth not reaffirmed by age 18	81	83	85	72	80	75
Deaths	80	82	104	87	95	84
Transfers out	136	113	80	74	105	81
Sub-total of subtractions	354	304	299	276	306	277
Total Bahá'ís	20,463	20,950	21,129	21,265	21,434	21,651

End of the Year

Address known	15,638	16,024	16,138	16,192	16,246	16,349
Address unknown	4,825	4,926	4,991	5,073	5,188	5,302
Total	20,463	20,950	21,129	21,265	21,434	21,651
% Increase on previous year	0.8%	2.3%	0.8%	0.6%	0.8%	1.0%

Year Ending	175 B.E. 20/03/2019	176 B.E. 19/03/2020	177 B.E. 19/03/2021	178 B.E. 20/03/2022	179 B.E. 20/03/2023	180 B.E. 19/03/2024
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Composition of the Community at the End of the Year

Adults	12,936	13,328	13,507	13,621	13,763	13,869
Youth	995	987	944	917	914	913
Junior Youth	475	494	485	468	423	413
Children	1,219	1,204	1,189	1,176	1,136	1,142
Date of birth unknown	13	11	13	10	10	12
Sub Total	15,638	16,024	16,138	16,192	16,246	16,349
Address unknown	4,825	4,926	4,991	5,073	5,188	5,302
Total Bahá'ís	20,463	20,950	21,129	21,265	21,434	21,651

Households

Address known	8,081	8,336	8,395	8,515	8,593	8,685
Address unknown	4,394	4,484	4,549	4,628	4,734	4,848
Total Households	12,475	12,820	12,944	13,143	13,327	13,533

Bahá'í Communities and Localities

Groups 9 adults & above	15	19	19	25	29	28
Groups under 9 adults	123	115	115	114	112	111
Total Groups	138	134	134	139	141	139

Isolated believers	44	45	44	41	45	51
Local Spiritual Assemblies	173	169	173	170	163	166
Administrative Committees	0	0	0	0	1	1
Total Localities	355	348	351	351	350	357

Registered Groups	26	27	25	26	29	28
Incorporated Assemblies	45	45	45	45	42	43

Reaffirmation statistics provided in the 'Add (during the year)' section are not included in the sub total of those friends 'added' to the Australian Bahá'í Community, as these individuals are already registered on Encompass as Junior Youth, and would be included in the tally of 'Total Bahá'ís'. This information has only been provided as a point of interest.

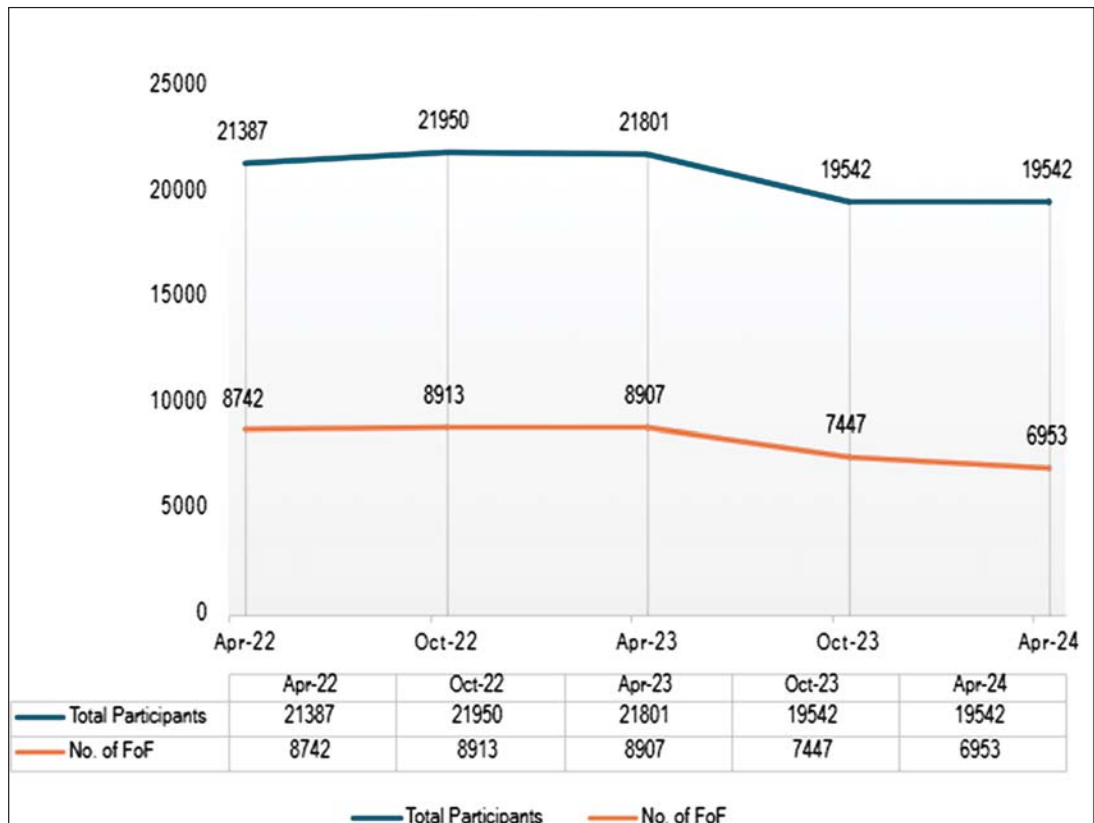
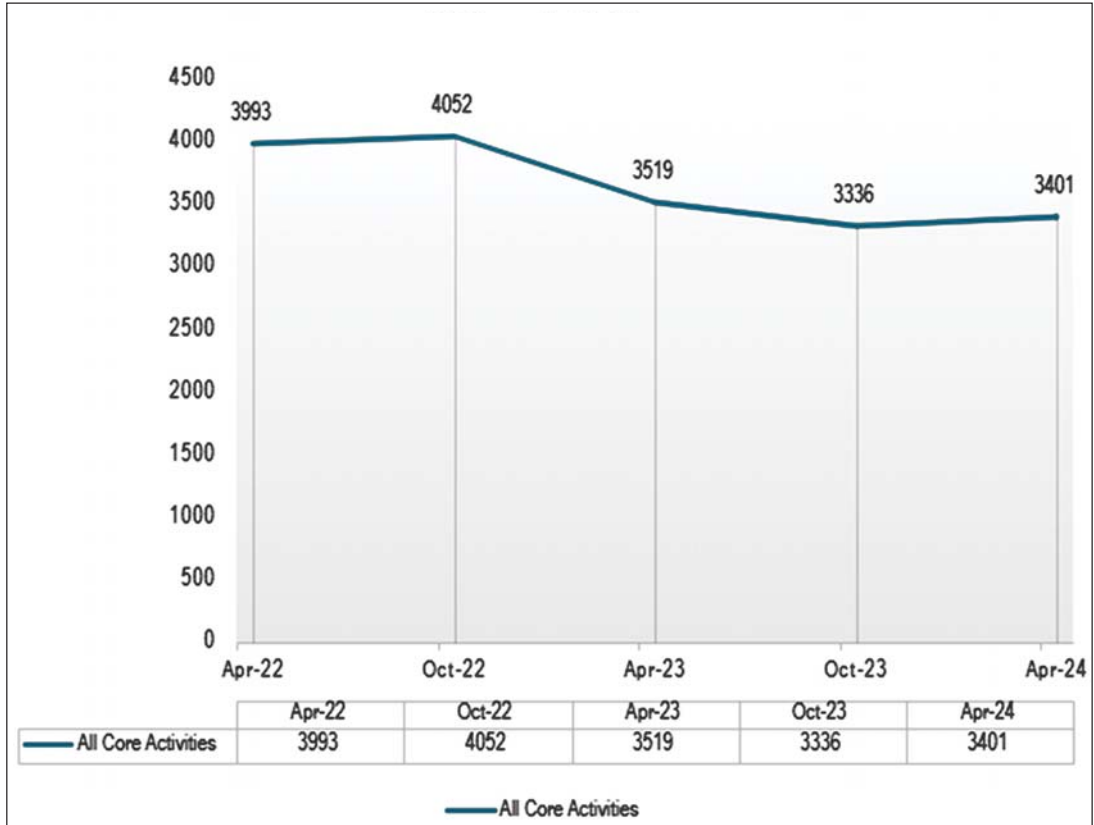
Also, as a locality may form a Registered Group at any point, the number of Registered Groups provided in the 'Bahá'í Communities and Localities' section could increase during the year.

Appendix C

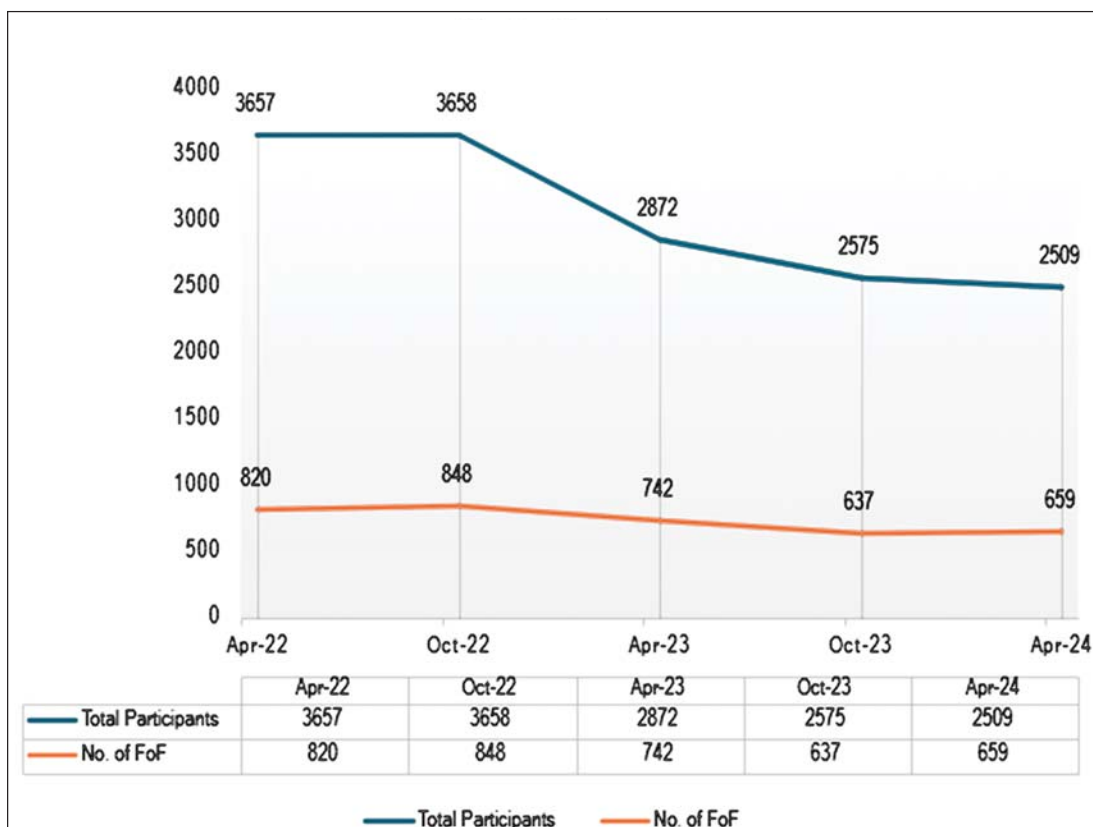
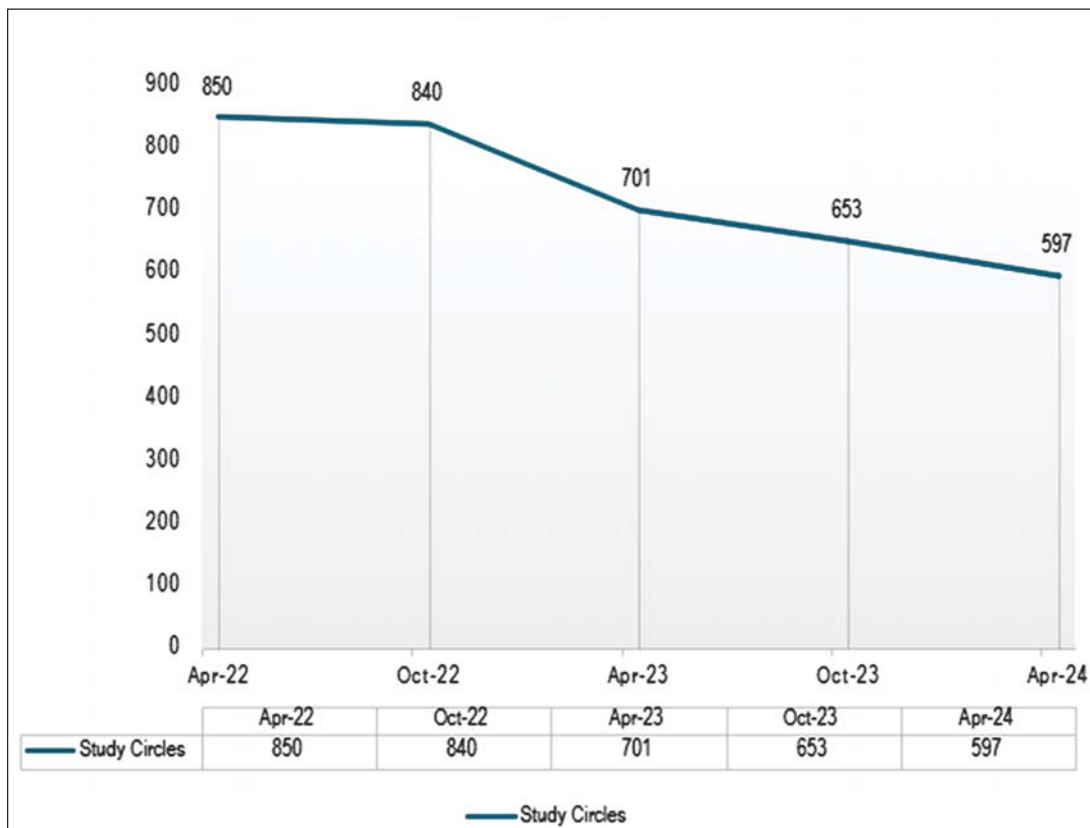
Core Activities Since the Start of the Nine Year Plan

All Core Activities

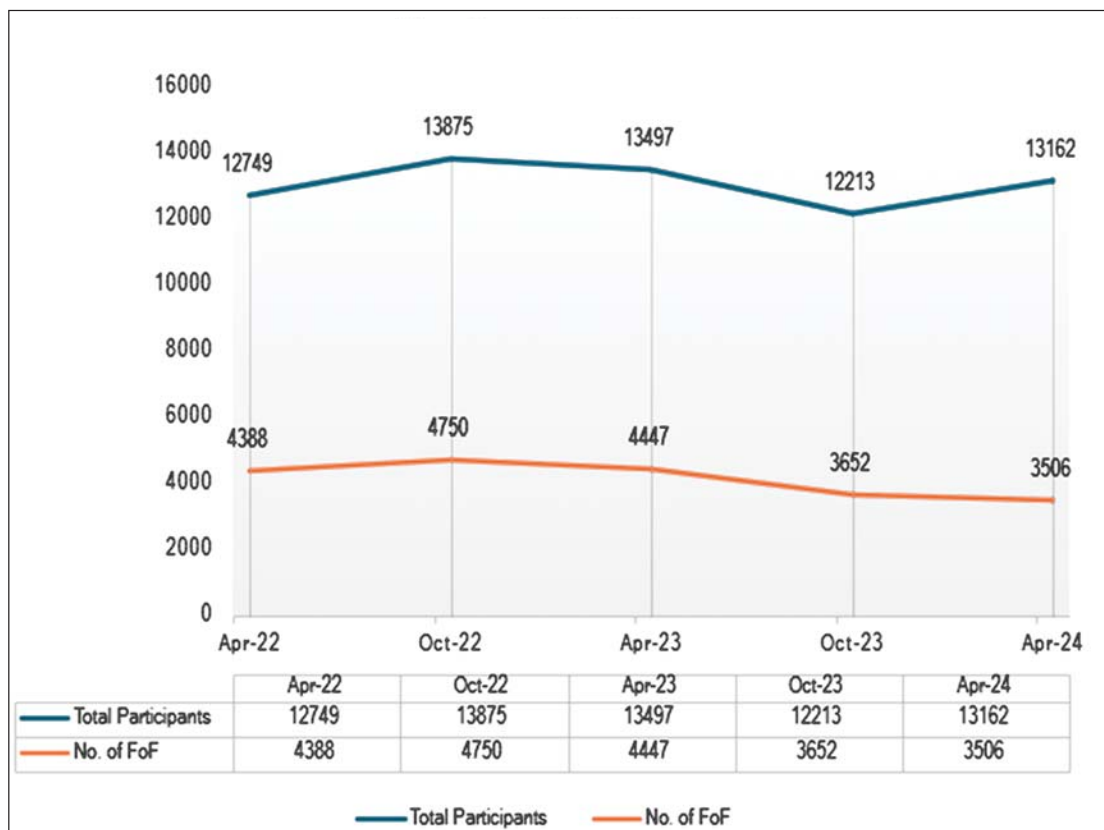
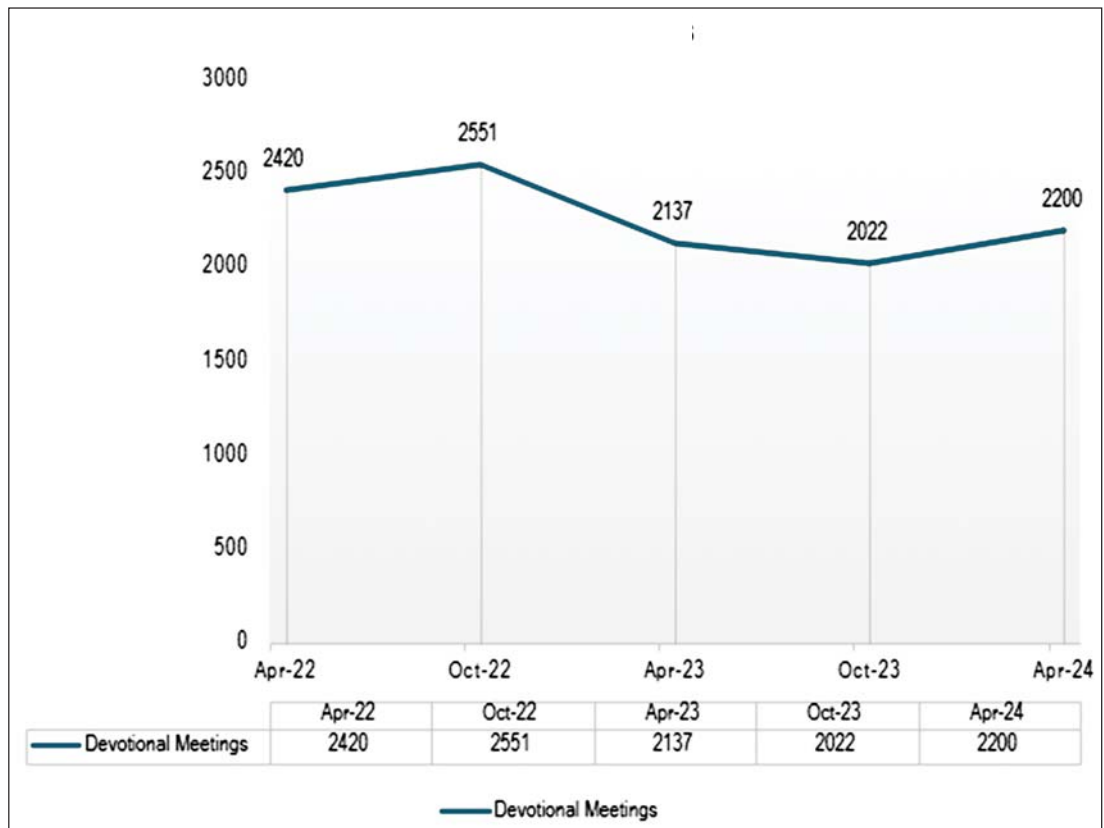
Statistics - Core Activities - Australia
Data extracted: 27 March 2024



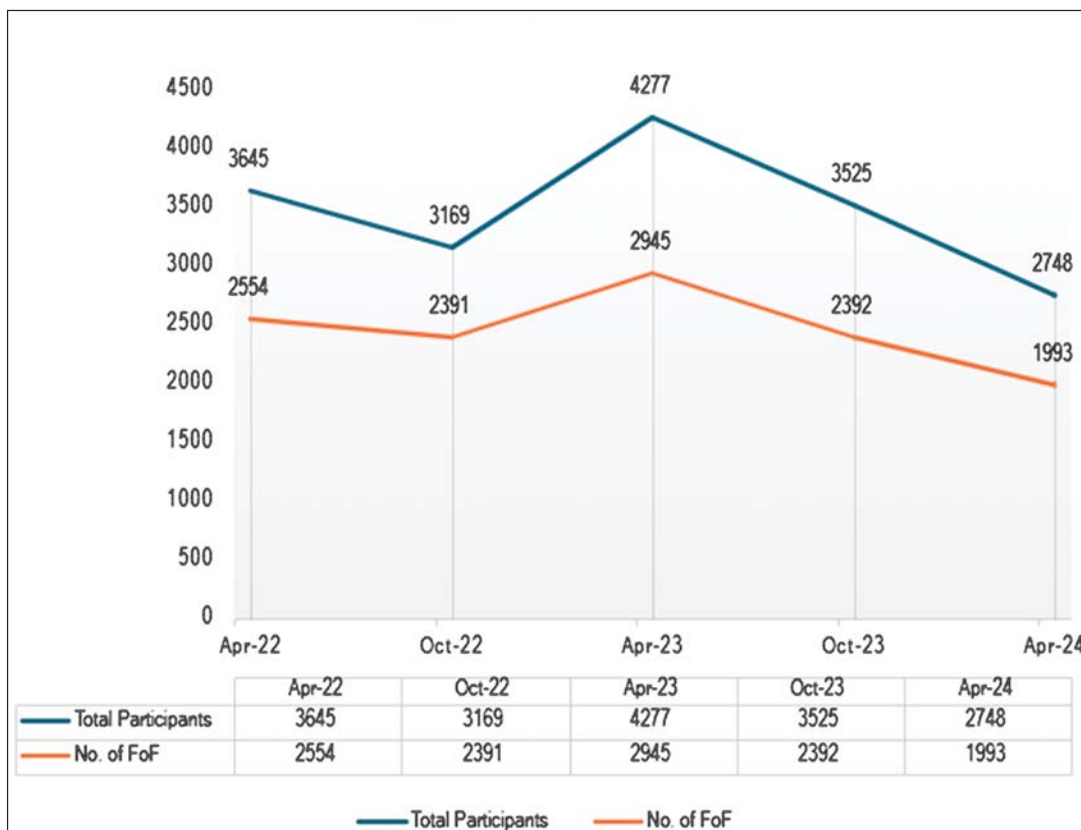
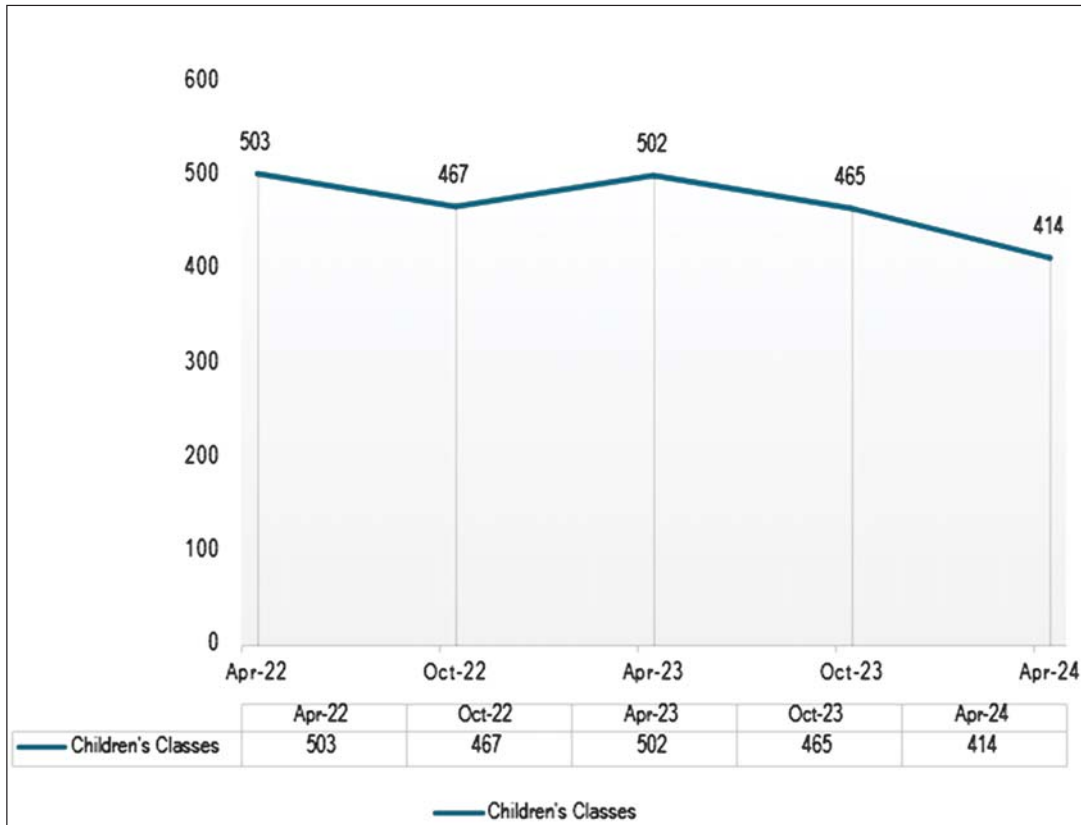
Study Circles



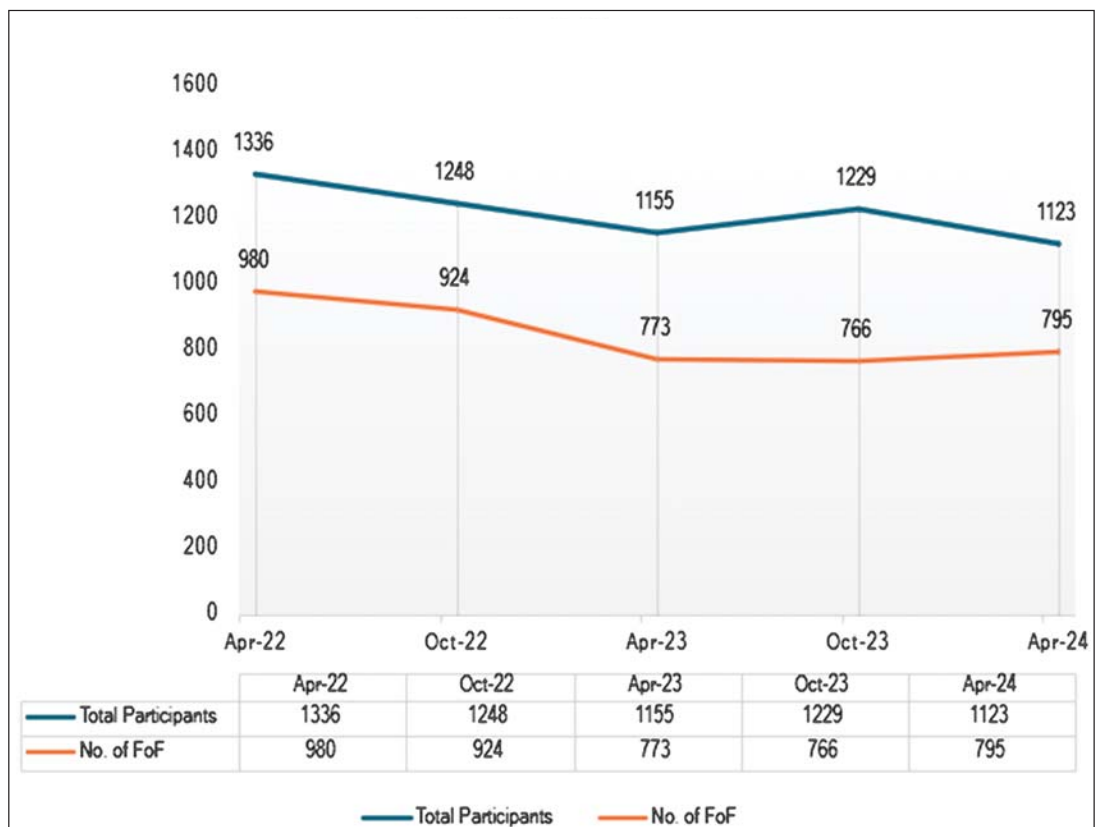
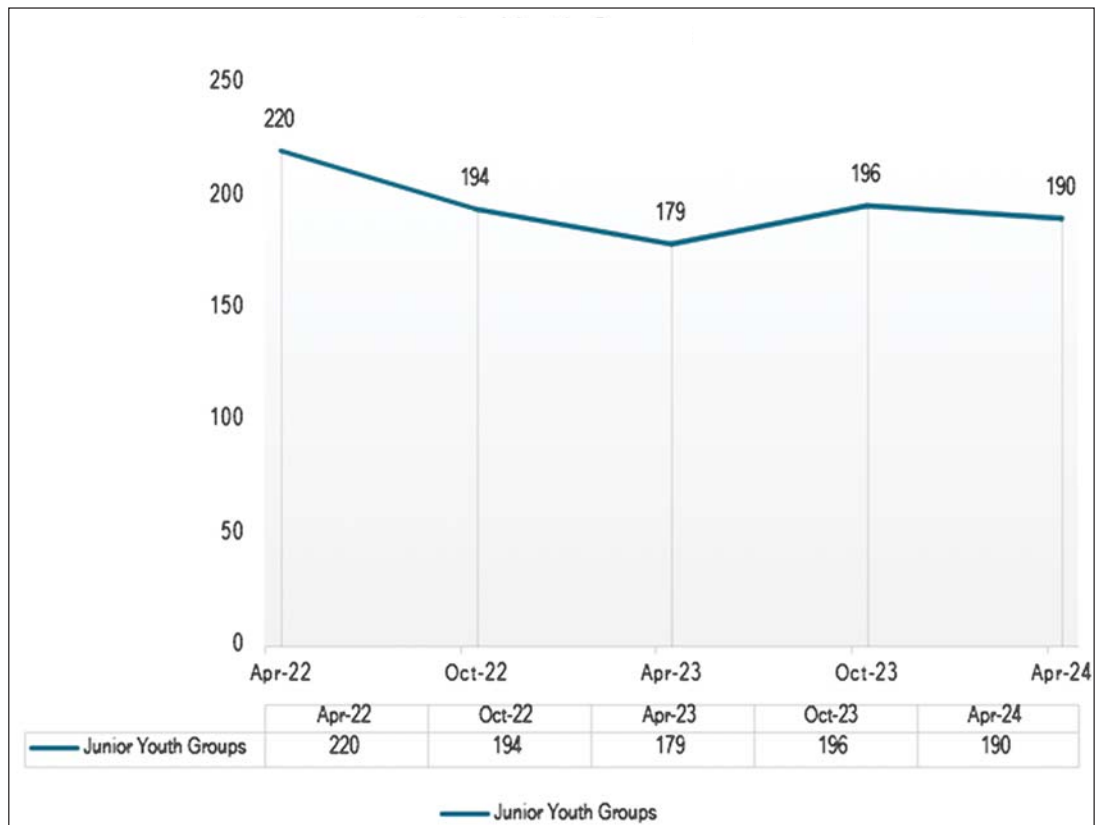
Devotional Meetings



Children's Classes



Junior Youth Groups







**National Spiritual Assembly of the
Bahá'ís of Australia Incorporated**

ABN 71 174 672 086

**Annual Report
for BE 180
20 March 2023 - 19 March 2024**

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